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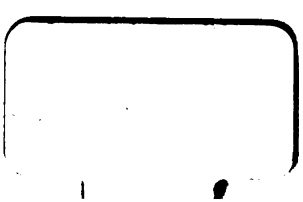

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Dinor, K.

By Maud Diver

The Hero of Herat

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Sunia, and Other Stories

Captain Desmond, V.C.

The Great Amulet

Candles in the Wind

Desmond's Daughter

Unconquered

"One moment his tall figure loomed against the dying splendour; the next, he sank cautiously down beside Miss Alison"

Drawn by D. C. Hutchison. (*See page 12*)

UNCONQUERED

A ROMANCE

BY

MAUD DIVER

AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN DESMOND, V.C.," "THE GREAT AMULET," "DESMOND'S DAUGHTER," ETC.

"The stars are threshed and the souls
are threshed from their husks."

Blake.

"Men and angels, ye
Whom stain of strife befouls,
A light to kindle souls
Bear, radiant, in the stain."

Meredith.

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
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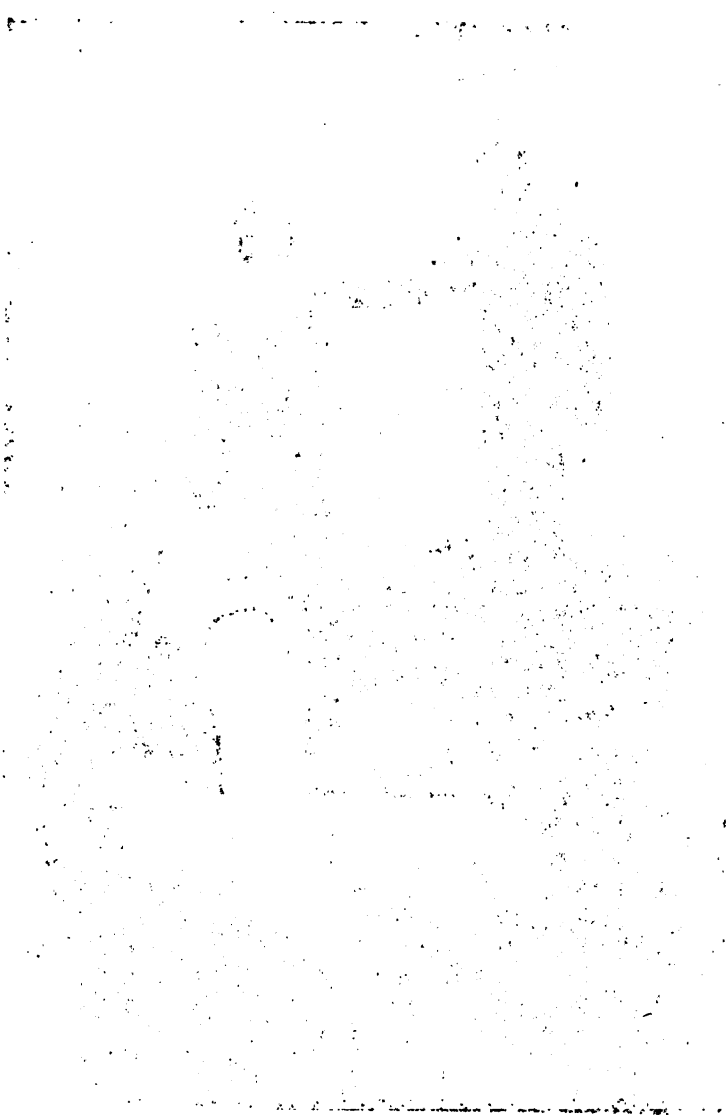

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Third Impression

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

To

MARY

IN REMEMBRANCE

OCTOBER 10TH, 1901

"A turn, and we stand in the heart of things . . ."

Browning.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The chapters dealing with France, and the incidents connected with these, are founded on fact. I merely mention this because it seems to me that the main incident gains in effect from the knowledge that it is not mere invention.—M. D.

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BOOK I

BEL

CHAPTER I

"Whom does love concern save the lover and the beloved? Yet its impact deluges a thousand shores."—E. M. FORSTER.

SIR MARK FORSYTH pushed back his chair, left the dinner-table, and strolled over to the bay-window. He drew out his cigarette-case, but apparently forgot to open it. He stood there, looking out across the garden, that merged into rocky spaces of heather and bracken, and culminated in an abrupt descent to Loch Etive. Low above the darkening hills the sunset splendour flamed along the horizon, and all the waters beneath were alight with the transient glory. But the man's face wore the abstracted air of one who dwells upon an inner vision. Though the subdued flow of talk behind him entered his ears, it did not seem to reach his brain. "Bobs," his devoted Irish terrier, crept out from under the table, and joining his master, made sundry infallible bids for attention, without success.

Presently alluring whiffs of cigarette smoke, intruding on his dreams, reminded Sir Mark of the unopened case in his hand.

"I vote for coffee on the terrace, Mother," he said, turning his eyes from the glory without to the dimness of the unlighted dining-room. "Then we'll have the boats out. There's going to be an afterglow and a half presently."

"I told Grant about the coffee two minutes ago, dear," Lady Forsyth answered, smiling; but her eyes dwelt a little anxiously on the silhouetted view of her son's profile, as he set a match to his cigarette. The straight, outstanding nose and square chin vividly recalled his dead father. But the imaginative brow was of her bestowing and a splash of light on his hair showed the reddish chestnut tint of her own people: the tint she loved.

"Come along, children," she added, including in that category four out of her five guests—two girls, unrelated to herself, Ralph Melrose, a Gurkha subaltern, and Maurice Lenox, an artist friend of Mark's.

Keith Macnair, professor of philosophy—his rugged face lined with thought, his dark hair lightly frosted at the temples—was the only genuine grown-up of her small house-party. A connection of her own, and devoted to both mother and son, he was so evenly placed between them in the matter of age that he could play elder brother to Mark or younger brother to Lady Forsyth as occasion required. And, whenever professional claims permitted, occasion usually did require his presence, in some capacity, either at Wynchcombe Friars or Inveraig. Between times, he lived and lectured and wrote philosophical books in Edinburgh; and never, if he could help it, did he fail to spend most of his summer holiday at Inveraig.

When the party rose from the table he joined Mark in the window; and as the two girls stood back to let Lady Forsyth pass out, she slipped an arm round each. Her love of youth and young things seemed to deepen with her own advancing years. But she had her preferences; and it was the arm round Sheila

Melrose that tightened as they passed through the long drawing-room to the terrace, where coffee was set upon a low stone table in full view of the illumined lake and sky.

"It's splendid to have you safe back again, child," she said, releasing Monica Videlle and drawing Sheila down to the seat beside her. "India's monopolised you quite long enough. There's some mysterious magnetism about that country. People seem to catch it like a disease. And I was getting alarmed lest you might succumb to the infection."

Miss Melrose smiled thoughtfully at the sunset. "I'm not sure I haven't succumbed already!" she said in her low, clear-cut voice. "I have vague tempting dreams of going back with Ralph when his furlough is up; or with Mona, to help doctor her Indian women. But probably they'll never materialise——"

"More than probably, if *I* have any say in the matter!"

Lady Forsyth spoke lightly, but under the lightness lurked a note of decision. She had her own private dreams concerning this girl with the softly shining eyes under level brows, and the softly resolute lips that never seemed quite to leave off smiling even in repose.

At mention of India, Miss Videlle's thoughtful face came suddenly to life. "It would be lovely for me," she said. "Too good to be true!"

"Never mind, Miss Videlle," Maurice consoled her almost tenderly. "This ripping evening's not too good to be true. And *I* can put you up to some tips for squaring Lady Forsyth—in strict confidence of course!"

He bent towards her with a slightly theatrical offer of his arm, and they moved off to a seat near the ivy-covered wall, looking towards the distant rapids.

Lady Forsyth glanced after them with a passing twinge of concern.

The girl—a fairly recent acquisition of Sheila's—was shy and clever, with a streak of dark blood in her veins. She had done brilliantly at Oxford, and was now qualified to take up the medical work in India on which she had set her heart. Sheila had acquired her while going through a course of massage and magnetic healing, for which she showed so distinct a gift that she had serious thoughts of taking it up in earnest. A vague idea of going out with Monica Videlle had been simmering in her brain for the past week; but she had not spoken of it till to-night.

"Wonder what's come to old Mark," mused Ralph pensively, stirring his coffee. "Thought this picnic arrangement was all for his benefit——"

"Rather so!" Mark's voice answered him, as he and Macnair strolled round the corner of the house. "Hurry up with the coffee, Mums. I love dabbling my oars in the sunset. Lenox, old chap, you two might go on ahead and give the word."

They went on readily enough; and the rest soon followed them through the wilder spaces of the garden, down rocky steps to the bay, where sand and rough grass shelved gently to the water's edge. Here they found two boats already afloat, with Maurice and Monica—she was commonly called Mona—established in one of them.

Lady Forsyth, nothing if not prompt, privately consigned Ralph to that boat, Mark and Keith to

her own. It was a heavenly evening, and she thanked goodness they were going to have it to themselves: quite a rare event since Maurice Lenox had discovered that superfluous Miss Alison.

"Coming to row stroke for us?" she asked as Mark handed her in.

He shook his head, smiling down at her.

"That's to be Keith's privilege! I'm for the other boat." But neither his smile nor the light pressure of her arm could atone for the refusal.

"Pointed and purposeless," she denounced it mentally; but within a very few moments his purpose was revealed.

"Down Connel way first, Keith," he called out, as he pushed off his own boat and sprang lightly in. "I want to run up to the village. Miss Alison and her friend might like to join us."

So they rowed towards Connel at his command: and for Lady Forsyth the pleasure of the outing was gone; the peace and beauty of the evening spoilt by fierce resentment against these intrusive strangers who had no authorised position in the scheme of things. And her natural vexation was intensified by concern for Sheila: though whether the girl took Mark's sudden and strange defection seriously it was impossible to tell. She wore that smiling, friendly graciousness of hers like a bright veil, that seemed to baffle attempts at intimacy, while it enhanced her charm. Even with Lady Forsyth, who loved her as a daughter, she had her reserves, notably on matters nearest her heart.

"After all, she knows the real Mark almost as well as I do," Mark's mother reflected by way of consola-

tion. "And she's wiser than I am, in many ways, though she *is* nearly thirty years younger. I'm probably racing on miles too fast. He's barely known the girl a fortnight. He *couldn't* be so crazy!—All the same, he's no business to—it's distracting!" she concluded, her irritation flaming up again at sight of the two figures that were now approaching the shore, escorted by Mark.

Miss Alison, the taller one, had unquestionably height and grace to recommend her. Mark, who stood six feet in his socks, could barely give her a couple of inches; and the languid deliberation of her movements had, on Lady Forsyth, the same maddening effect as a drawl in speech. Her own brain and body were too quick, in the original sense of the word, not to make her a trifle intolerant towards the "half-alive"; and, rightly, or wrongly, Miss Alison was apt to produce that impression even on her admirers, though no doubt they expressed it differently.

Personal prejudice apart, Lady Forsyth preferred the girl's companion, Miss O'Neill, in spite of her wrong-headed zeal for the Suffrage and Home Rule. Had Bel Alison been out in search of a foil, she could have discovered none better than this big-hearted, fanatical woman of five-and thirty, shortish, and squarely built, with an upward nose, an ugly, humorous mouth, and a quantity of rough brown hair in a chronic state of untidiness. Lady Forsyth gathered that she was an active philanthropist, and that the incongruous pair shared a flat somewhere in Earl's Court. To outward seeming they had certainly nothing beyond the same address in common.

If Bel's movements were over-deliberate, Miss

O'Neill's were apt to be sudden; and she strode into the boat with the decision of one given to putting her foot down to some purpose.

"Steady on! You evidently don't do things by halves!" Sir Mark remonstrated, laughing, and consigning her to a cushion in the bows. Bel had already usurped Maurice's seat astern, and Mark rowed stroke—this time without need of invitation. Then they turned about and moved slowly up the loch, dabbling their oars in the sunset fires and shivering the purple shadows of the hills.

And if for Helen Forsyth the pleasure of the evening was over, for Mark it had but just begun. And she knew it. Therein lay the sting. Though "the boy" was now very much a man, she could honestly have said, two weeks ago, that nothing beyond minor differences and mutual flashes of temper had marred the deep essential unity of their relation—a unity the more inestimably precious since he was now all she had left of her nearest and dearest on earth. Husband, daughter and younger son had all passed on before her into the Silence, and of her own people one brother alone remained. At the moment he was High Commissioner of New Zealand, and seemed disposed to stay on there indefinitely when his term of office expired. The Empire, he wrote, was a saner, sweeter, more spacious place of abode than twentieth-century England, which seemed temporarily given over to the cheap-jack, the specialist, and the party politician. And she—while loving every foot of her husband's country and her own—understood too well the frequent disappointment of those who came, on rare and hardly earned leave, from the ends of the

earth and failed to find, in picture-palaces and music-halls, in the jargon of Futurists and demagogues, the England of their dreams.

For this cause, her sole remaining brother had become little more than a memory and a monthly letter. Yet, could she never account herself a lonely woman, while she had Keith for friend and mentor, Mark for son, and Sheila for—more than possible—daughter. What business had this unknown girl to step into their charmed circle and unsettle the very foundation of things? Never, till to-night, had it seemed possible to Mark's mother that she could arrive at dreading the fulfilment of his heart's desire. Yet that was what it amounted to. Dread lurked behind her surface irritation. The touch of second sight in her composition made her vaguely conscious of danger in the air. Small wonder if she anathematised Maurice Lenox for his knack of picking up promiscuous strangers, and, in this case, aggravating his offence by failing to appropriate his own discovery.

CHAPTER II

"Quand on vous voit, on vous aime; quand on vous aime, où vous voit-on?"

For a while the two boats kept in touch, so that talk passed easily between them. Miss Alison spoke little. Silence rather became the fair pensive quality of her charm—and probably she knew it. The uncharitable supposition was Lady Forsyth's: and she was fain to confess that pensiveness and silence harmonised well with the fine, straight nose, the mass of dull gold hair, and eyes of that transparent blue which lacks warmth and depth, yet has a limpid beauty of its own, especially where the pupils are large and the lashes noticeably long.

Mark, too, had fallen silent: the worst possible sign. But Miss O'Neill atoned for all deficiencies by discoursing vigorously to Maurice's swaying shoulders, upon the latest developments of the suffrage campaign. Maurice, equal to any emergency, had no difficulty in airing his own views on the subject —as it were, through the back of his head—to one who had hammered shop windows with her own hand, though she graciously drew the line at firing churches and wrecking trains. Yet she was a woman of generous and, at times, noble impulses. The greater part of her small annuity was lavished on a very personal form of rescue work—and on Bel.

"It's rank injustice, say what you please," she declared in her strong vibrant tones, "to imprison and torture poor misguided girls who have the courage of the faith that's in them. The real blame lies on the heads of those who've *driven* us to extremes."

"That sounds very fine, Miss O'Neill, but I'm afraid it won't hold water," Macnair put in quietly from the other boat. "It has been the standing excuse of fanatics and—dare I add?—criminals all down the ages. Your latest forms of argument will simply harden and justify opposition to a cause that is not without certain elements of justice and right."

His pleasant voice had the clear, leisured enunciation of the scholar, a quality peculiarly exasperating to the red-hot enthusiast whose thoughts are, in the main, emotions intellectually expressed. "Justice and right indeed!" Miss O'Neill fairly hurled the words at him. "That's all we're asking, isn't it? And precisely what we'll never be getting under a man-made Government and man-made laws."

Macnair smiled and shrugged his shoulders. He had no mind to let argument and recrimination desecrate the peace and glowing beauty of a Highland summer evening; and with practised ease he slid into the calmer waters of generalisation, as much in the hope of weaning Lady Forsyth from troubled thoughts as for the pleasure of expressing his own.

"The truth is," he said, resting on his oars, while the boats drifted into a luminous bay, "every age, like every country, has its moral microbe; and the microbe of this one is 'Down with everything'; 'Can't; won't; shan't; don't; Pass it along the line,' that's about the tune of it, in all ranks. Kipling

may or may not be a classic poet, but his *Commissariat Camels* puts the present-day spirit into a nutshell. For nearly a hundred years the world has been fed on a steady diet of revolt; and now we have the climax, distaste for duties and clamour for rights. The fine, brave old wisdom of acceptance is altogether out of court——"

Mark, withdrawing his gaze from Miss Alison's profile, treated him to a smile of amused approval. "Why this sudden access of eloquence, old man?" he asked; and Keith deliberately winked over his shoulder.

"Miss O'Neill there's to blame; and the modern world does seem rather egregiously modern when one's been living for months in a backwater with Pindar for company."

"Oh, Keith, have you really found time for your promised translation of the *Odes*?" Lady Forsyth—herself a translator of some distinction—leaned eagerly forward.

"I've been making time for a few of them," he answered, pleased with the success of his diversion, "by neglecting my Bergson book."

"Have you got them here?"

"Yes. They're in type, awaiting your consideration."

"Well done. You'll publish them, of course?"

He shook his head. "Not even to please you! I've simply been enjoying myself, exploring a little deeper into the heart of an old friend; one who could look life in the face without feeling convinced that he personally could have made a better job of it. One suspects even our poets, these days, of being

propagandists in disguise. Pindar is as sublime and as useless as a snow-peak; and one can no more convey the essence of him in English than one could convey the scent of a rose in Parliamentary language! Yet one is fool enough to try!"

Sheila, who had been listening with her quiet intentness, remarked softly, "*Why* don't we all learn Greek?"

"Because the humanities are out of court in an age of scientific materialism. Wasn't there a promise, once, that I should teach *you?*"

The girl flushed with pleasure. "I thought you'd forgotten."

"And *I* thought Miss Videlle had persuaded you to give up everything for this massage you're so keen about."

Their talk took a more personal tone, and Lady Forsyth's attention strayed again towards the other boat. It had drifted a little farther off, and a change of seats was in progress between Mark and Miss Videlle. One moment his tall figure loomed against the dying splendour; the next, he sank cautiously down beside Miss Alison, who vouchsafed him a sidelong glance of welcome.

"We're moving on a bit, Mother," he sang out, seeing her face turned in their direction.

They moved on accordingly: and it did not occur to Lady Forsyth that Miss O'Neill, sitting alone in the bows, obscured from vision of the disturbing pair, was in much the same mood as herself. Lonely, passionate, and emotional, her thwarted womanhood had found in Bel Alison an object on which she could lavish at once the protective tenderness of a mother

and the devoted service of a man. Unhappily, this last included a consuming jealousy of those who had a better natural right to the girl than herself. Diligently and skilfully, therefore, she had scattered seeds of prejudice against the unjust half of creation —which, by the way, she very much appreciated in units, while denouncing it in the mass. By way of a more positive deterrent, her slender means were taxed to the utmost that Bel might have cushions and flowers and curtains to suit her fastidious taste. No one, least of all Miss Alison, suspected the extent of her secret shifts and sacrifices. And, intermittently she had her reward. But no skill in self-deception could blind her to the fact that her lavish devotion was as dust in the balance against the passing attentions of a baronet, lord of two estates, and a fine-looking fellow to boot. To-night the conviction rankled with peculiar keenness by reason of her suppressed irritation with Macnair.

"Shirking the issue. Just like a man!" she soliloquised wrathfully. "And dragging in his own trumpery translations by the heels. The conceit of the creatures! And the folly of them. Wasting good abilities over the vapourings of a musty old Greek poet. Blind as a bat, or simply not caring a snap that the world's crammed with evils crying out to be reformed. Let them cry, so long as *he* can scribble in peace. . . ."

At this point her somewhat chaotic thoughts were interrupted by music from the other end of the boat. Mark was singing Wallace's lullaby, *Son of Mine;* half crooning it, at first, for the benefit of Miss Alison, who did not know it. But as the strong swing of

the melody took hold of him, he let out his voice to the full—a true, clear baritone; music in its every cadence; and something more than music, for those who had ears to hear.

Harry, raging inwardly, heard, and understood very well that the days of her own dominion were numbered. Lady Forsyth understood equally well; but she had passed beyond the raging mood. The song was an old favourite; every note of it laden with associations; and in spite of herself tears started to her eyes.

As for Mark, others might understand or not as they pleased. He was singing to an audience of one; to the girl who sat beside him, her uncovered head lifted and half turned away toward the dark sweeping curves of the hills.

When the murmur of applause died down she turned to him with the slow lift of her lashes that, conscious or no, thrilled him afresh at each repetition. "I didn't know you could sing like that," she said softly.

"I can't always," he answered, flushing under her implied praise. "Sometimes—it just takes hold of me. Don't you sing yourself? I'm sure you've got music in you."

She suppressed a small sigh. "Oh yes. It's one of my poor little half-fledged talents; useless for want of proper development. My elder sister's the clever one, and *she* got all the chances. She found me convenient sometimes for duets."

"Duets? Good. I know plenty. Let's have a try. What was her line?"

"Classical. Mostly German."

Mark was silent a moment raking his memory. Then he had an inspiration. "Mendelssohn's 'I would that the love' . . . ? Wasn't that the sort of thing?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"Right! We'll give them a treat. You take the air."

She shook her head. "You're going much too fast. I never said I'd sing; and—I've rather forgotten the words."

"You won't slip out of it that way!" he told her; and leaning close he crooned under his breath: "I would that the love I bear thee, My lips in one word could say; That soft word——"

"Oh yes, I remember now," she cut him short rather abruptly; but a faint colour showed in her cheeks and this time she did not lift her lashes. "Very pretty, but drenched with sentiment. That's the worst of German songs."

"Well, you can't beat the music of 'em," he persisted, rebuffed a little by her tone, and hoping it was assumed for the benefit of Miss Videlle, who was most vexatiously in the way. "I'm set on it anyhow. Are you ready?"

Taking her smile for consent he moved one hand, beating time in the air; then, without preliminary, their united voices took up the song. Bel's, though sweet and true within its range, proved too slight an organ to stand the open-air test, and Mark had need to moderate his full-toned alto accordingly, thereby giving an added effect of tenderness to words and music already sufficiently expressive.

And again Lady Forsyth—a most unwilling listener

—understood everything far too well. Deliberately she hardened herself against the appeal of the music. For this time she was simply angry—angry as she had never yet been with her son; though, needless to say, she attributed his egregious behaviour entirely to Miss Alison.

"How can he? How dare he!" was the cry of her pained heart. "So unlike him. An insult to Sheila. Flinging his folly in her face."

But Sheila was drawing her finger-tips lightly through the water, watching the effect with that shadowy smile of hers, and to all appearances simply enjoying the song. Almost Lady Forsyth found herself hoping that it was so. In any case, she was thankful when the "exhibition" ended, and Maurice's cheerful voice was heard calling out: "Your turn, Miss Videlle! Can't you give us a music-hall masterpiece by way of diversion?"

But Miss Videlle disowned all knowledge of masterpieces, music-hall or otherwise, and Maurice himself came nobly to the rescue.

"I'm not up to Mark's style; but I'm top-hole at genuine Harry Lauders," he volunteered with becoming modesty. "And as you're all so pressing, it would be ungracious to hide my light under a bushel."

"Good egg!" sang out Ralph from the second boat. "Give us 'Roamin' in the Gloamin'.' "

And Maurice, with a deliberate wink at Mark over Miss Videlle's shoulder, proceeded to give it for all he was worth, in the broadest of broad Scotch. But Mark was in no mood to see the joke of a performance that sounded far too like a travesty of his own chosen love-song.

" 'I kissed her-r twice and I asked her-r once if she would be my br-ride,' " sang Maurice with insolent gusto, burring his r's like a policeman's rattle; and Mark simply wanted to kick him into the loch.

Lady Forsyth, on the other hand, was privately blessing the boy's foolery, that seemed to clear the air and sent the boats skimming homeward to the swing of chorus on chorus; only her son's voice being conspicuous by its absence. Keith's boat was leading now; and without turning round deliberately she could see nothing of the two who haunted her mind.

This was perhaps fortunate; for Mark's arm lay along the back of the seat, his shoulder was within three inches of Bel's; and under cover of the music they had picked up the dropped thread of their talk in lowered tones that imparted tender significance to the simplest remark.

"I don't call your singing a half-fledged talent," he said with a faint stress on the pronoun. "You've the gift, anyway. Why not make more of it—study, practise?"

She smiled and lifted her shoulders. "I've tried, but I couldn't keep it up. Laziness, perhaps; I don't know. Vanity, perhaps, a little. I either want to do things splendidly or else—I can't be bothered. I need someone to spur me, to encourage me."

"Well, I should have thought Miss O'Neill——"

"Harry? Oh yes, she'd lie down and let me walk over her if I wanted to. But she's swamped in 'the Cause' and philanthropic work. As for my talents, when I wanted the helping hand it wasn't there;

and now—it's too late. I've dabbled first in one thing and then in another, and frittered away what little ambition I ever had."

The emotionless quiet of her tone suggested a noble resignation to the general obstructiveness of life; a resignation that, to the man's strenuous spirit, seemed alike pathetic and premature.

"Why, you're only on the threshold of things," he rebuked her gently. "What are the talents you've dabbled in? Do tell me."

"Oh, I've written a little and acted a little. I wanted badly to take that up in earnest. Heavens! Wasn't there a row! So I fell back on the writing. Verses, chiefly."

"Have they appeared, any of them?"

"A few. Here and there. I was vain enough once to have a booklet printed out of my allowance. Then there was a worse row than ever."

"But why?"

"Well—they weren't exactly of the pretty-pretty order. And my father's a clergyman: that kind of clergyman."

"I see."

He saw her, in fact, a creature of fine sensibilities, striving for self-expression, thwarted, discouraged, and misprized by those who should have been her natural helpers, and his heart went out to her the more.

"May I—" he hesitated. "Miss Alison, won't you let me see some of your verses?"

"No. Not for the world." She flushed suddenly and her voice had a tremor in it. It was the first time he had seen her really perturbed.

"I'm sorry," he began; but she was mistress of

herself in a moment and turned the matter off with a laugh.

"We're both making mountains out of molehills! The verses were wretched poor stuff, most of them. Father was quite right to condemn them; but he went the wrong way about it. He usually does. They were just the outcome of—an influence; a passing phase. I hated them myself—afterwards. One does go through phases, doesn't one? At least I do. It's rather interesting. Saves one from the bottomless pit of boredom, the only thing we're really afraid of nowadays." She made the statement in all seriousness. "But—looking back—one sometimes wonders how much that other girl was really me?"

He did not answer at once; partly because he was trying not to be aware that while she spoke there had blown through him a chill breeze of doubt: an unwelcome reminder that after all he knew nothing as yet of her life, her antecedents, or—if it came to that—of herself. He only knew that almost from the first moment of contact she had put a spell upon him that he had neither the power nor the will to resist.

"Do I seem to be talking utter nonsense?" she asked suddenly in a changed voice; and doubt fled like a wraith at sunrise.

"Rather not. I was only hoping—that this *is* the real you. I'm not simply a phase—am I?—like all the rest?"

At that she turned to him with the lazy uplift of her lashes, and the astonishing blue of her eyes flashed on him like a light.

"Isn't it—rather too soon to tell?"

"*Is* it?" he challenged her boldly, and exulted to

see the blood rise in her cheeks. More than that he could not achieve. For another Lauder chorus had just died down and they were nearing the shore.

"Look here," he said, low and rapidly. "I am off up the loch to-morrow in my little steam yacht—fishing. Come along too—will you?"

She gave him a reproachful look. "I can't. You know I can't."

"Oh, well, bring your police dog along if you must; and I'll get Lenox to make a square. Will that do?"

"Yes. I'll ask Harry. If it is like to-day—it'll be lovely."

"Better than to-day, I hope," he muttered, wondering very much if he could wait till then, and cursing the wire entanglements of convention.

"I'm going to see you home," he announced as he handed her out of the boat, and repeated his intention when all the party was ashore. "Good night, Mums," he added, laying a hand on his mother's shoulder. "Lenox is coming along with me. Leave things open for us, will you?"

"Very well, dear; don't be too late," she said, looking up at him; but between the gathering dusk and his own preoccupation he missed the mute appeal of her eyes.

During the short walk back to the village, Miss O'Neill took complete command of affairs. Having at last recovered her treasure, she slipped a retaining hand through Bel's arm, and never a chance had Mark of another intimate word.

She graciously fell in with the morrow's plan, however; and afterwards, as the men strolled back, smoking, to Inveraig, Maurice was frankly informed

what would be expected of him on the occasion. Mark betrayed his repressed excitability by speaking rather more rapidly and abruptly than usual.

"I'm running this show altogether—you understand? We're not going off on a blooming picnic to play consequences. No nonsense, mind. And no Harry Lauder—confound you! All you and Miss O'Neill are required to do is to make yourselves scarce. Fact is, you're only there because I couldn't get—Miss Alison to come alone."

Maurice smiled broadly. "I gathered as much. But I say, Forsyth," he hesitated and took a pull at his pipe, "do you really mean business?"

"Rather so. What kind of a cad d'you take me for?" snapped Mark, whose temper was quick at the best of times. "Think I'd play the fool with a girl like that?"

"Sorry, old chap. Didn't intend to rile you. Only to a mere outsider, it seems just a trifle precipitate. Besides—one naturally thought——"

"Oh, dry up. Nobody asked you to think."

There was pain as well as anger in Mark's tone. He knew very well what Maurice thought—what others were likely to think; and although Lady Forsyth did not guess it, his sensitiveness on Sheila's account almost equalled her own. It hurt him horribly that by any act of his he should seem to cast even the slightest slur on her. And he saw no reason. For years they had been like brother and sister. Certainly, since her return from India he had caught himself wondering— But before wonder could crystallise into belief, Bel had arisen in her moonlight beauty and all the stars of heaven had suffered eclipse.

Come to think of it, he owed young Lenox a debt he could never repay; and for the rest of the way he made royal atonement for his flash of temper.

"Good night, old chap," he said when they reached the house. "I'm not turning in just yet."

And for more than half an hour he paced the terrace, wondering, hoping, dreaming; while his mother lay awake in her bedroom above, both windows flung wide, listening to the restless sound of his footsteps; wondering also; and scarcely daring to hope that he had already spoken and been refused.

Not until she heard him come in, at last, and shut the door of his room, did she let her tired body have its way and fall into a troubled sleep.

CHAPTER III

"You know not the limit of this kingdom, still you are its queen." RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

Miss O'NEILL, as might be supposed, proved no easy subject for diplomatic manipulation. Long before they had made an end of their picnic-lunch, in a glen of rocks and birches and purple cushions of heather, she had effectually given Mr. Lenox to understand that she was neither to be deceived nor coerced by his tactful attempts to detach her from the other two. Years of pushing and shouldering through obstacles in the Suffrage campaign, had so far blunted her finer sensibilities that she could smilingly hold her ground even among those who obviously wished her elsewhere: and she held it to-day, till Mark lost patience and frankly took the bull by the horns.

"I say, Miss O'Neill, you might take pity on Lenox and honour him with your company up the glen," he said; and beneath his engaging tone there lurked a faint note of command. "He's no fisherman, and he can't keep himself to himself for ten minutes on end. So you see, it would be a real act of charity to remove him."

"Yes, Sir Mark, I can see *that* without spectacles," answered the redoubtable Harry, challenging him with her greenish-brown eyes.

"Good business!" Sir Mark retorted unabashed. "When you reach the high moor you'll be rewarded by a view that's worth some climbing to see. Of course, if Miss Alison would prefer to go with you ——"

"Miss Alison's far too comfortable where she is, thanks!" Bel interposed with her deliberate drawl. She had settled herself on a low rock and sat dreamily watching the river, elbows on knees, chin cradled in her hands. Without changing her attitude, she glanced up at Sir Mark and her smile seemed to link them in completest understanding. "If the necessity for silence becomes too overpowering I can always go to sleep. I'll be as good as gold, Harry dear—" She shifted her gaze to Miss O'Neill's resolute, rebellious face. "And I think Sir Mark can be trusted not to let me fall into the river!"

The upward jerk of Harry's head implied wholesale distrust of the species; but finding herself cornered she surrendered at discretion. "Well, Mr. Lenox," she said, "since it's a case of obeying orders, we must make the best of each other. This way, I suppose?" She strode on before him up the narrow, stony path; and Maurice, with an abortive grin at Mark followed in her wake.

Keeping well ahead of him, she toiled on indomitably till trees were dwarfed to bushes and the primeval splendour of the high moors came suddenly into view. Before them, and upon either hand, the heather and the heavens were all. It was as if they stood upon the shore of an amethystine sea, studded with islands of granite and juniper, and shadowed only by slow-moving continents of cloud. For Maurice, with the

blood of Eldred and Quita Lenox in his veins, such a vision was among the rare things that could smite him to silence. He drew a great breath and stood very still, his young, expressive face glorified, passingly, by the artist's pure joy in colour, and the Scot's love of the land.

Miss O'Neill, a townswoman by taste and habit, would have preferred a throng of human faces, any day, to the sublime emptiness around them. Hot, breathless, and in a ferment of anxiety, she sank gratefully on to the nearest rock and looked up at her companion; but the light on his face checked her ever-ready tongue. She liked the boy. He was more than "a mere he-thing," and that streak of the woman in him appealed strongly to the masculine strain in herself. But protracted silence irked her; and very soon anxiety goaded her into speech.

"Mr. Lenox, how long have you known Sir Mark Forsyth? Are you acquaintances or friends?"

Maurice considered that point without removing his eyes from the heather. "Rather more than acquaintances, I should say, and on the way to becoming friends. I've known him two years on and off. But I've never yet been to Wynchcombe Friars, his Hampshire place. He's crazy about it. They say you never know the real Forsyth till you've seen him there. I'm going there this autumn, to be converted from Futurism and Experimental Art in general! At least that's his notion. He's a splendid chap. Chockful of ideas. A bit reactionary, some of them. He's dead against what we should call industrial progress, and what he calls sacrificing the man to the machine. They've got a great scheme

on, he and his mother and Macnair, for joining up all the scattered attempts at reviving handicrafts and guilds——"

"Oh, bother their crafts and guilds!" Miss O'Neill broke in with scant ceremony. "Sheer fads! Result of riches and idleness. *I* want to know is he the kind of man to take up a girl violently—you see how it's been—just to pass the time?"

"No!" Maurice rapped out the negative with unusual vehemence. "As a matter of fact, I believe he intends to offer her his heart and his title and all his worldly goods before we get back to them."

Miss O'Neill started visibly. "What—on a fortnight's acquaintance?"

"Yes. A trifle steep, isn't it? And, for a man in his position, a wife's a rather important item."

"Something more than an amiable housekeeper—is that your meaning?" Miss O'Neill rounded on him, a flash of temper in her eyes. "I thought better of *you*, Mr. Lenox. But you're all alike in the grain. A man in Sir Mark's position must have a beautiful figurehead for his dinner-table: a graceful, accommodating doll, that he can hang with jewels and silks and satins. But my Bel's no doll-woman, for all her soft manners and sweet temper. No doubt he flatters himself that, in a fortnight, he's read her from cover to cover: and he'll be telling her, sure as fate, that he's the one man on earth to make her happy, and think he's paying her the compliment of her life into the bargain!"

Good-natured Maurice began to feel that Forsyth had been a trifle inconsiderate saddling him with a virago whom he was quite at a loss how to appease.

"Well—compliment or no, she's free to refuse him," he remarked soothingly; "and after all, it's the natural thing."

Miss O'Neill pounced on the words almost before they were out. "*Of course* it's the natural thing for a man like Sir Mark—spoilt by his mother, one can see with half an eye—to snatch at a beautiful woman. And where does a girl's freedom come in when a man dazzles her brain with extravagant lover's talk? Besides—he's rich. She's poor. It almost amounts to bribery. I hate the whole thing. I came away for her sake, to give her a chance of knowing him better, just in case— But if it's true, what you say, I shall go straight down again——"

She sprang up from her rock and faced about; but Lenox, smilingly determined, stood astride across the narrow path.

"Excuse me, Miss O'Neill, not if I can prevent it," he said. "Forsyth's going to have his chance fair and square. Of course if you're game for a free fight —well, come on!"

For a second she looked him up and down, a sudden flicker of humour in her eyes. "I tackled a policeman once. A bigger fellow than you. And he was very glad to get rid of me."

"I can well believe it," Maurice answered with becoming gravity. "But look here, just consider, what earthly good would you do by deferring the inevitable—say, twenty-four hours—and probably annoying Miss Alison into the bargain?"

The last shot told. Harry let out her breath in a great sigh. "Life's a bewildering business," she mused aloud. But common sense told her he spoke truth;

and she liked him none the less for backing up his friend. "Very well, Mr. Lenox, I give it up. You evidently have instructions from headquarters, and I'll stay here till you give the word. But scenery bores me stiff; so please make yourself as interesting as you know how."

"Right you are," said Maurice; and indicating her deserted rock he flung himself on the heather at her feet in such a position that her prosaic figure in its knitted coat and rough skirt should not intrude upon his vision of the landscape. Then he proceeded, in his fluent fashion, to enlarge on the subject uppermost in his mind—Sir Mark's queer conviction that a wide-spread revival of handicrafts and guilds would go far to solve the strike problem by restoring the creative sense in labour and renewing the broken link between art and life——

For Sir Mark himself, at that moment, life held only one purpose, one achievement worthy of serious consideration—the linking of his own destiny with that of the girl who seemed capable of maintaining indefinitely her graceful pose of contemplation. It was a pose that revealed to admirable advantage the long lines of her figure and the beauty of her small head with its close-fitting coils of hair. Her discarded hat lay on the heather at her feet. Close to her chosen rock sprang a young birch, its supple grace a reflection of her own; its drooping plumes, stirred by the breeze, dappling her blue dress with tiny restless shadows.

Was it some day-dream that so held her, Mark wondered, or pure consideration for the trout that he had presumably come out to catch? Either way,

her silence and abstraction had the effect of so intensifying his own emotion that speech seemed desecration. Besides—he had spoken already. Could there really be any need to tell her again how swiftly and strangely she had swept him from his moorings, so that life held nothing, momentarily, but his glorified vision of herself? Last night the sound of her voice, echoing his own confession, had silenced, for good, the whispers of prudence that strove to curb his impetuous spirit, counselling delay. If only that confounded Miss O'Neill had given him a chance while the glamour was on them both, the whole thing might have seemed less egregiously precipitate. Now that he had schemed for half an hour's privacy; now that she sat there, only a few yards away, seemingly unaware of his existence, a shiver of uncertainty chilled him. A fortnight ago to-day, while he and Maurice were rambling in search of subjects, he had beheld her for the first time. For him that fortnight was an indefinable age. For her it might simply be fourteen days——

But this sort of havering would never do. He was a strong man, not unschooled in suffering, but little used to being thwarted in his desire. And he did not seriously expect to be thwarted now. Deliberately he laid aside his fishing tackle, and leaning on one elbow looked up at the girl, whose rock was set a little higher along the sloping bank of the stream. For a few seconds he took his fill of her, from the coronet of her hair to the seductive curves of her mouth and chin that made such tender atonement for the cool directness of her eyes.

Still she did not move; but her lips parted in a

small sigh, and the spell was broken. Mark rose and planted himself before her.

"Miss Alison," he began—and could get no further.

"Well?" she asked with that distracting lift of her lashes. "Is the precious tackle out of gear?"

Her coolness almost angered him and gave him sudden command of his tongue. "*Tackle?* D'you really suppose I came out here to catch trout?"

"You said so last night. And you seemed to be making elaborate arrangements——"

"So I was—to get half an hour alone with you," he announced bluntly, and saw the ghost of a blush creep up under her skin. He wanted simply to take her in his arms without more ado. Instead, he sat down close to the rock, plunged his hands in the heather, and leaned towards her.

"I was trying to tell you last night. Didn't you understand?"

"N-no. I thought the music—and the sentiment had rather carried you away."

"It was *you* who carried me away. The music was a kind of safety-valve, that's all." He leaned still nearer. "Bel—is there a ghost of a chance for me? Is it sheer conceit and impertinence on my part to ask—so soon?"

"No—oh no." And suddenly she covered her face as if the intensity of his gaze affected her like strong sunlight.

He was silent a moment, watching her and crushing the heather in his strong fingers. Then, very gently, he laid a hand on her knee.

"What is it? Tell me. I *must* know."

At that she dropped her hands. By chance or

design, one of them fell on his own and rested there. The light contact sent electric thrills up his arm.

"That's just it," she said with her slow smile. "You must know. But we neither of us do — yet. It's been a wonderful fortnight. And if I haven't travelled quite so fast or so far as you, that doesn't mean——"

"Of course it doesn't. I'm not such a conceited ass as to suppose you could fall in love with me at sight. But now I've spoken—isn't there any response?"

"Haven't you felt any?" she asked lightly, and the hand that rested on his moved in a just perceptible caress.

"For God's sake don't play with me!" he broke out, half angry again. "I'm in deadly earnest."

"I know. That's just why one of us must try to keep a cool head."

"Nonsense! You're simply fencing. And you haven't answered my question."

"I'm trying to. But I'm half afraid . . . to let myself go. No—don't!" She warded him off with a gesture, but deliberately replaced her hand over his. "It's too sudden altogether. Wouldn't it be wiser—for both of us—to wait a little? You don't really know me one bit."

He bowed his head and kissed the fingers that covered his own. "I know I love you," he said simply, his deep voice low and controlled. "And if you can say the same, that's enough for me. The rest will be an enchanted voyage of discovery."

"Voyages of discovery are rather risky things," she reminded him. "And sometimes—they end in

smoke. You see, you're not just any one. I'm outside your world; and—your mother doesn't like me."

"Nonsense," he said again, with less conviction than before.

"It isn't. I'm sure she wants you to marry Miss Melrose. And I thought at first—you seem very intimate."

"Naturally. Our intimacy began when she was eight and I was twelve." He spoke looking out across the stream. Something in him winced at her allusion to Sheila in that connection. But it was only fair to her to explain things; and he forced himself to proceed. "Her people are our nearest neighbours in Hampshire. Her mother's the sort of person who subsists chiefly on fads and philanthropy—the kind of philanthropy that makes you abominate charity and all its works. When we lost . . . Ailsa, my little sister, Mother sort of annexed Sheila, unofficially. But that doesn't imply—that she expects me to do likewise. We're devoted to her—both of us. She's a splendid little person;" he turned now and spoke with greater naturalness and warmth. "Not very easy to know. But *real*, right through. You're bound to love her. There—are you satisfied?" Without warning he slipped an arm round her. "Will you give me my answer now?"

He felt her yield under pressure of his hand: then, with a sudden enchanting simplicity, she lifted her face to his——

Presently she sighed; pushed him from her a little and looked steadily into his eyes—blue, like her own, but a deeper, tenderer shade, shot through with fine

radiations of orange. Hers seemed still to hold a question. His were purely exultant.

"Darling, we've done it now," he said under his breath.

"Yes. I suppose—we have," she answered in the same key.

"Suppose? You're not going back on things, after *that*. Next question is—when will you marry me? Next week?"

Her flush, that had died down, mounted again, clear carmine, beautiful to see. "Oh, Mark! Give me a few minutes to realise it all. You're so impatient. Such a boy. You make me feel . . . ages old——"

"Look here, I can't have you talking that sort of rot," he protested; incorrigibly blunt, even in love. "It's morbid sentimentalism. You see, I'm the son of a mother who doesn't know how to feel old at fifty. 'Boy,' indeed! You're a mere child yourself—the dearest in creation."

"No—no. I'm *not* a child." Her emphatic protest rang true. "Perhaps your mother has kept the bloom on life. Mine has never had any bloom on it, worth mentioning. I was reared in a groove; a very virtuous groove; and . . . I didn't fit. I wanted to feel and know and live; to be something more than a vegetable in a Wiltshire village. I knew I had talents of sorts; and I felt, if I could only get away and have a fair chance, I might achieve something worth doing, or, at least . . . meet a man worth marrying." She spoke looking away from him across the sun-splashed water. "The only brother I cared about went off to the ends of the earth before he was

twenty. If I'd been old enough to go with him, I wouldn't be here now!"

"Poor darling!" He tightened his hold of her. "Dreadful calamity—isn't it?—to be here now! But didn't your mother understand you—help you?"

"Poor little mother. She did her best. My unconventional streak comes from her side. But she's a very tame edition; watered down by an early marriage with father, who's as conventional as a high-road, but unfortunately not as broad! Privately, I think she was half proud of me and half terrified of what I might do next, like the hen in Hans Andersen. It was father's pharisaical attitude towards my mild vagaries that made me worse, till at last I kicked clean over the traces, demanded a reasonable allowance (to my amazement, I got it), and went off to London, to take the world by storm."

"To Miss O'Neill?" Mark queried, a faint anxiety in his tone.

"Oh no. Harry's a fairly recent phase. I boarded with a friendly family in the second-rate theatrical line. That was my chosen road to achievement. But it didn't come off—worse luck!"

"Nor the man worth marrying?"

Her eyes lingered in his. "Not to any great extent! They were rather a mixed lot. And everything seemed in league against me. I made no headway anywhere. Still—it was experience. It was life. One was too busy, either hoping or despairing, to be dull. Each new phase seemed to be the discovery of a new kingdom, till you found—you hadn't the key. There was the writing phase, the acting phase, the American phase——"

"America? Why on earth——?"

"Oh, I don't know. The chance came. And the notion attracted me. A bigger, fresher world; experience——"

"You seem mighty keen on experience," Mark struck in. "D'you mean knowledge—or simply new sensations?"

She hesitated. "After all—new sensations *are* a form of knowledge. The most interesting on earth. I'd go almost anywhere to discover the feel of things ——"

She stopped short, and Mark frowned into vacancy. For the first time he caught himself wondering how old was she.

"*I* should say better be an ignoramus than a mere connoisseur in sensations," he remarked quietly. "But perhaps I missed your meaning."

"Perhaps there wasn't any meaning to miss! I was talking—rather at random." Then very lightly she leaned her head against his. "Mark—dearest, don't look like that."

"Well, you mustn't talk like that," he said with decision. "How long were you in America?"

"Eighteen months. Not very pleasant always. But it did me no end of good. I even went home for a time, full of fine resolves. But the poor things soon shrivelled up in father's atmosphere. Then—it was Harry to the rescue."

"And now it's Mark!" With sudden fervour he caught her to him. "No more 'phases' after this, my Bel. You shall have your freedom and your chance. I'll make up to you, all I can, for the bad years. Mother will love you——"

Bel shook her head. "She doesn't like me."

"Darling, she doesn't know you. Mother may have her cranks and prejudices. But if there's one woman on earth she can be trusted to love—it's my wife. I'll take you to her to-night."

"No—no. To-morrow. To-night—there's Harry. It'll be a blow. You see, when I first came to her, I was so sick with everything, I swore I'd never marry. She's jealous already——"

"Poor soul!" Mark said tenderly. "But I'm jealous too. I can't share you with Miss O'Neill. If it comes to a tug, you'll have to choose between us."

"I have chosen." She spoke with genuine fervour; and leaning against him, she closed her eyes. So seen, her face looked years younger and of a saint-like purity. Doubts and qualms seemed sacrilege. Without a word he kissed her lowered lids, and found, to his surprise, that her lashes were wet.

CHAPTER IV

"I am of an age with each; what
Matter if my hair turns grey?"
—SIR RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

THAT radiant day of summer, all too short for Mark, taxed to the utmost his mother's impatient spirit that could bear any ill better than the ache of suspense, sharpened by premonition of the worst. Mark's offhand manner of announcing the day's programme to the breakfast-table in general confirmed her own secret fear. And if he were really crazy enough to speak, the result was a foregone conclusion. She would be asked to love, as a daughter, this alien girl, of whom she knew nothing except that she was not the real mate of the real Mark.

At the thought, a horrid sense of helplessness overwhelmed her. Open opposition would be worse than futile: yet smiling acquiescence was beyond her. Truth of intercourse—finest of all fine arts—was, for both mother and son, a necessity of their natures. To it they owed that deeper intimacy not often attained between one generation and another; but, in the present dilemma, it would make things so much harder for them both that dread almost outweighed her longing for his return.

Breakfast ended, Ralph announced his intention of carrying both girls off for a long walk. Keith retired to the study with the *Scotsman* and a formidable pile of correspondence, leaving Helen to her own devices. Nothing she liked better, in normal circumstances; for her devices were many and absorbing. But to-day the silence and emptiness seemed to affect her like a ghostly presence, impalpable, yet vaguely threatening. A chill sense of impending disaster swept through her. She felt suddenly tired; oppressed by the dead weight of the years that she carried with such valiant elasticity of body and spirit and heart.

Half a century of life had dulled but scarcely silvered her red-brown hair; had pencilled fine lines between her brows and at the corners of her too sensitive mouth. But youth still triumphed in the eyes, in the slender alertness of her figure, in the swift impulsion of thought and speech. Yet she lived and felt life—the whole world's life—too intensely not to suffer moments of sharp reaction; and this was one. Hitherto, she had seen Mark's marriage as the chance of regaining a daughter. Now she saw it, rather, as a risk of losing her son, and her heart cried out that this was more than she could bear. In the past twelve years, she had suffered loss on loss, with a sort of fierce stoicism, the nearest approach to resignation that one of her nature could achieve. Now, being a mere mother, she must stand aside and watch him drifting on to the rocks——

It simply did not bear thinking of; and, gathering up her letters, she went in search of work, the unfailing anodyne for every ill.

At that time, under Keith's critical supervision, she was translating Emile Faguet. She was also studying Russian, with other translations in view; and she had correspondents in all parts of Europe, many of whom she had never seen. But these activities were fringes merely on the main work of her life—the revival of arts and crafts and home industries among Mark's people and the linking up of all similar efforts throughout the United Kingdom.

Yet, for all her activities and far-reaching aims, her true life had always been centred in her home. And she was content that it should be so; content to let outsiders dub her "Victorian," for refusing to be swept into the maelstrom of modern restlessness; to let the "progressives" swirl past her—social reformers, seekers after new religions, new panaceas for every ill; content to find time for cultivating the art of friendship, not merely in her own class, but among Mark's tenants on both estates.

Leisure to possess her own soul and the hearts of others was, for her, a simple necessity of life; and that very necessity, by limiting her sphere of action, was half the secret of her influence and charm. Ideals are uncomfortable things socially, but they have the merit of keeping their owners fresh; and the world's more strenuous workers found in her home atmosphere, a refreshment and inspiration worth some sacrifice of activity to preserve in an age of wholesale experiment in life and art and religion. They might rate her for living in a backwater; but, as intimacy grew, they realised that she was more vitally in touch than themselves with the world's greater issues; that her uneventful days were rich in experi-

ence, informed by a central purpose and an unshaken faith in certain abiding truths—periodically obscured and neglected, yet as certain to return with power as sunshine after rain.

"When religion decays and irreligion prevails, then I manifest Myself. For the protection of good, for the destruction of evil, and for the firm establishment of national righteousness, I am born again and again."

Krishna's ancient prophecy, printed in gold on an illuminated scroll, confronted her as she entered her sanctuary. The scroll had been a birthday "surprise" from Mark; an achievement of schoolboy days when he was altogether her own; and the thought upset her equanimity afresh.

Look where she would, the room was full of him: a friendly, intimate room, set in the bastioned tower that dated from feudal times. But arrow-slits had long given place to unlimited light and air; and, like all rooms that are loved and genuinely lived in, it was quick with the personality of one who imparted something of herself to the very chair she used and the books and pictures on her walls. These last were few and individual; but of the books there was no end. A catholic assembly, they climbed the only bit of wall-space not occupied by the grate. They stood about invitingly in revolving cases; and a privileged company was piled upon the floor near her chair. Keith often accused her of having an untidy mind: and the state of her room betrayed her. The one tidy spot was the writing-table, which she never used.

Over the mantelpiece hung an early portrait of

her husband, that might almost have been a portrait of Mark. But Sir Richard's face was heavier than his son's; the brow more massive, the lower lip more prominent. It was a shrewd, virile Anglo-Saxon face, unillumined by the Gaelic strain that Mark had from his mother.

Yet, throughout, Sir Richard had respected his wife's ideals and enthusiasms, had smiled indulgently over her panacea for the democratic peril, and had allowed her a fairly free hand in the education of his sons. So long as the heir of Wynchcombe Friars remained a staunch Imperialist, he might be as constructive as he pleased: and if there was the remotest truth in Helen's convictions, let Mark stand for Winchester and air his views in Parliament. That had been Sir Richard's practical contribution to the subject.

But the Baronet had now been dead ten years; and, so far, Mark had made no bid for Parliamentary fame. Helen Forsyth had spent the first years of her widowhood travelling in Europe with Keith and Mark, who gave promise of developing into a sculptor of originality and power. For his benefit as an artist they had lived mainly in Florence, Rome, and Greece, with a bias in favour of the first. For in the great Florentine, young Mark had found his acknowledged master of his own thoughtful yet fiery spirit. But, for his education as a man, Lady Forsyth had insisted on more than a nodding acquaintance with the rest of Europe; and finally Mark had spent two years reading voraciously at Oxford, largely with the art and labour problem in view.

Since his coming of age, he had devoted himself heart and soul to sculpture and the management of

his estates. But the notion of Parliament still remained in abeyance. The rise of the lawyer-politician and the commercial magnate had intensified his native distrust of democracy, while the increasing narrowness and bitterness of party spirit had effectually quenched his natural ambition to stand for the county of his birth. One Forsyth uncle already represented the family. In Mark's opinion that sufficed; and neither Keith nor his mother had quarrelled with his decision.

It was as artist and responsible landowner that she longed to see him pre-eminent; and every year he had given clearer promise of fulfilling her hope. At seven-and-twenty there remained only the last and most critical achievement—his marriage. On this score alone he had caused her more than one flutter of anxiety; and now——!

She clenched her teeth to keep back the futile curse; and, for the next hour or so, kept her attention chained to the intricate task of transposing idiomatic phrases and fine shades of meaning from one language into another.

It was nearly twelve when the door opened and Sheila appeared, bringing the *Times* and the midday post: Sheila, with a bright spot of colour in each cheek and a smile that radiated sweetness and light. How on earth could Mark——? But that bitter, useless question was taboo.

Her own smile was more natural than it had been at breakfast; but Sheila did not fail to detect the lurking shadow in her eyes, or the significant fact that she did not eagerly tear open the paper and plunge into the latest letter from Belfast.

"Mums, haven't you spent enough of this glorious morning grinding at Emile Faguet?" she said, kneeling down and laying a hand over the open page. "You look tired—worried."

"I *am* worried," Lady Forsyth admitted with a direct look, and Sheila's colour ebbed a little.

"Unhappy, are you—about Mark?" she asked very low.

"Yes. Haven't I reason to be?"

"But, Mums—she seems a very sweet person. And if he cares——"

"My dear, you're as bad as the rest of them about that girl."

Lady Forsyth was so rarely impatient with her that Sheila set her lips a moment before venturing further. "Well, you know, she *is* extraordinarily attractive."

"Is she? I don't see it."

"Isn't that, perhaps, because—you won't see it?"

"*Sheila!*"

"Dearest—I'm sorry. But surely he must know her better than we do, because—he cares. And you don't give her a chance if you shut your heart against her. It's so unlike you. And it will be very hard on Mark . . . if she——"

"Oh, child, be quiet!" Championship from this quarter was intolerable; and setting her hands on the girl's shoulders she gave them a gentle shake. "There's no call to waste any of your sweet pity on Mark. If he speaks to-day—and I have a horrid feeling he will—*she's* not likely to refuse him. And that's all he cares about at the moment. I'm not being unjust to him, dear. I'm facing the truth;

which is sometimes quite as difficult as facing cannon. But—well, I can't talk about it. You talk, instead. You haven't told me half enough about India. I've an idea—something happened out there. Am I right?"

The girl nodded, looking out seaward. "I've been wanting to tell you and yet rather shirking it. This one—hurt me a good deal."

"*Another* 'poor thing'?"

"Yes; badly poor. What Mark would call a worm. The third in two and a half years! I begin to be ashamed of myself! And—a little afraid too." She paused. "Mums, because I'm not a wobbler myself, will it always be the wobbling men who insist on clinging to me? Shall I perhaps be driven by this troublesome law of opposites to choose between marrying some pitifully lovable 'poor thing' or—never marrying at all? Not lively alternatives — are they?"

Lady Forsyth's hand slipped from the girl's shoulder to her waist. "Darling, I hope it won't come to that."

"So do I. Naturally I'd . . . prefer to marry. I—" she hesitated and coloured a little—"I would feel desolate . . . without children. Am I very . . . premature?"

Lady Forsyth drew her close and kissed her warm cheek.

"You're very woman," she said. "And Fate may have better things in store for you than the most importunate wobbler of them all. I hope you discouraged this last one more decisively than his predecessor."

Sheila shook her head. "I simply couldn't. They do tug badly at my heart-strings. No denying it."

"I suppose that means he's still hanging on? And hurting you every time he gives a fresh tug? A fine exhibition of masculine selfishness!"

"Mums, he doesn't realise it hurts. And—he has so much against him: if you only knew——"

"Well, I *want* to know." Pushing aside her manuscript she drew a low stool close to her chair, and Sheila settled down on it, with a small sigh of content. "Now tell me. What has he against him?"

"Loneliness and poor health; and an ugly little desert station at the end of nowhere; and hating the country—and—and drink!"

"Darling! You've outdone yourself this time!"

Sheila turned quickly. "*Please* stop bothering about me, and be sorry for him. You would be, if you'd seen him. So worn and sallow; though he's barely thirty. Clever—very. Too many brains and too few convictions I used to tell him. And then, there had been a girl—when he was home on his first leave. She made violent friends with him: she drew him on till he lost his heart to her; only to find that she had deliberately used him as a stalking-horse for another man, who afterwards turned out to be married already. He heard that she went off with him in spite of it, but *that* he can't believe. A dismal tale, isn't it? The trouble was he couldn't stop loving her, even though he knew she was worthless ——"

"Until he found in my beautiful Sheila the privileged bit of sticking-plaster to mend his heart!"

Lady Forsyth interrupted her with a touch of heat. "I wonder he had the face to tell you——"

"He didn't tell me till I'd refused him—twice. Then we had a long talk and he poured out all his bottled-up miseries. And I wasn't *only* a bit of sticking-plaster. He'd stopped loving her long ago. Do be fair to him, dearest. You're in a wicked mood to-day!"

"I've never been in a worse. And the tale of your latest 'poor thing' isn't exactly a specific for the blues! How about the drinking? And what was the final understanding, after refusals followed by confidences?"

The hand that rested on her knee moved in a slow, soothing caress. "I'm afraid you won't approve. Ralph didn't. But I overruled him. He—Mr. Seldon—begged me so hard not to throw him over altogether that I said he might write once a month. And the thing that arrives is more like an intimate diary than a letter. He *can* write, Mums. And he isn't drinking—like he was. That was part of the compact. It began in a bad cholera season: no one to notice; no one to care. He says the average man never realises, till he has to spend months alone, that what he calls the voice of his conscience is much more often the voice of other people's! So now—I'm his 'other people'! He gave me his word and he writes quite honestly about it. If ever he really slips back again he says he'll stop writing and chuck everything. —There! That's my poor little tale; I'm happier now it's out. You may scold me; but you'd have done just the same yourself!"

For answer, Lady Forsyth put both arms round her

and kissed her fervently. "Be as angelic as you please to your poor things, darling," she said. "But for heaven's sake don't marry them."

"I couldn't," Sheila answered softly. "I'd sooner —go without."

In the silence that followed Lady Forsyth felt as if the girl must hear her vehement thoughts. But very soon Sheila spoke again.

"I told Mr. Seldon about our little colony of arts and crafts, and he is ever so interested. He says machinery's gaining ground fearfully fast in India; cheapening and speeding up everything and killing the craftsman's joy in his work, just as it's done over here. I had a letter yesterday. He enclosed some Indian designs for carving. I *must* show you."

She ran off to fetch them; and thenceforward "shop" banished every subject from the field. They were still at it when the gong sounded for lunch, and half the interminable day was gone.

Lunch would be rather an effort. Helen's eager interest in the panorama of life made it a matter of course that she should lead the talk at table, and she was in no mood for it to-day.

To her relief, she found herself spared the trouble. Keith, who had an uncanny knack of divining her needs, came in armed with a book that had arrived by the second post and made havoc of his morning's work. His feigned inability to part with it was obviously an excuse to make it the main topic of the meal.

"Calls itself an *Essay on the Confusion of the Arts*," he said, placing a spare knife between the leaves. "I ordered it for Mark on Stoddard's recommenda-

tion. But I'm inclined to think it really belongs to you. The writer upholds so many of your pet convictions.—Listen here." The knife was removed. "'Of course the present movement may continue indefinitely; we may have ideas of education still more undisciplinary; a still more pathological outpouring of fiction; . . . In short, the dehumanizing of life and literature may go on for ever. But we should not count upon it. Reactions have been known to occur, and they have occasionally been sudden. The world may even now be threatened with a subliminal uprush of common sense, however disconcerting the prospect may be to Mr. Bernard Shaw and his followers. But prophecy is vain. Everything depends on leadership; and one can never tell whether the right persons will take the trouble to be born!'"

"One only knows they are notoriously lazy in that respect!" Lady Forsyth struck in with a chuckle of appreciation. "I like your new friend. Any more gems of that quality?"

"Several. Ah—here we are. Don't you seem to recognise your own voice? 'Any one who makes a stand for vital and humane concentration is set down as a mere laggard or reactionary, whereas he may find himself, rather, a pioneer and leader of a forlorn hope—not all forlorn. . . . The revival of broad, vigorous, masculine distinctions between art and art alone can save us from the confusions that have crept into modern life and literature, and which I trace to two main sources—emotional unrestraint and pseudo-science. . . . To set colour above design, illusion above informing purpose, suggestion above symmetry, is to

set the feminine virtues above the masculine—and that has been the chief cause of the corruption of art and literature in the past century.' "

An indictment so sweeping roused Mona, fresh from her Oxford triumphs. "But, Mr. Macnair, I call that heresy!" she protested; and Keith smiled indulgently at her unusual warmth.

"Heresy, my dear young lady, is, after all, only the truth as seen by the fellow in the opposite camp. And there still remain certain unregenerates in the other camp who are praying for the rediscovery of Man."

"Or a German invasion!" murmured LadyForsyth. "With apologies to Mona, I'm afraid nothing milder will save us from the petticoat peril!"

At that Ralph looked up from his mayonnaise. In a wilderness of abstractions, here was something he could understand.

"I say, Lady Forsyth! Rather a costly form of salvation, don't you think?"

"Salvation is always costly, Ralph," she answered him gravely. "And it is always worth the price paid."

Here Mona struck in again; and the argument, as Keith had intended, carried them well through lunch.

The meal over they adjourned to the shade of three ancient pines on the terrace; but very soon Ralph, who was frankly bored, persuaded Mona to come out on the loch, and Keith's contentment was complete.

The new book lasted them till tea-time. Then as none of the wanderers reappeared, he was persuaded to fetch his translations and read them to the audience of two for whom they had probably been writ-

ten, if the truth were known. It was sometimes said of Macnair that men delighted in his lectures almost as much for the quality of his voice as for the lucidity of his thought: and to-day, when instrument and music were in perfect accord, the effect on Helen's troubled, sensitive spirit was all that he could have desired. She possessed in full measure the artist's gift of surrender to a mood. Sheer beauty of thought and language, serene and splendid harmonies, drawn from the discords of life, stirred her like organ music; and for Keith her abstracted silence was the quintessence of praise.

Suddenly, round a bend of the loch, a white sail dipped into view:—and the spell was broken. Keith who had seen it also, still read on; but he no longer had the ear of her spirit. She was simply listening for the sound of Mark's footstep—and another.

To her relief, the scrunch of gravel, when it came, plainly bespoke masculine boots. Then the two men appeared round the corner of the house, and Mark waved his stick. Bobs, who had been left at home, flung himself headlong on his recovered master with little sobbing squeals of joy, and, for one wild moment, hope revived in Helen's heart.

"Well, you three look jolly comfortable there," Mark greeted them, as he came up; and it was Keith who answered him. His mother seemed to be looking for her scissors. One glance at his face had sufficed.

CHAPTER V

"Of love it may be said, the more unearthly, the more invisible."

HARDY.

THE first moment that escape was decently possible, Lady Forsyth left the group under the pines and went straight to her bedroom. Mark would follow her, of course, but she had desperate need of a few minutes' breathing space. She knew now that what Keith called "the brave old wisdom of acceptance" was still far from her; that she had not really faced the truth till she saw it in Mark's eyes. And while her pulses still throbbed unevenly his voice sounded at the door.

"Mother, can I come in?" he asked; and the next moment stood before her—a glowing embodiment of victory.

"Congratulate me, Mums," he said. "I've brought off the great event with honours. Miss Alison—Bel has promised to be my wife."

"I know. I have known it—all day," she answered him, with a brave attempt at a smile.

"More than I have! Hadn't the cheek to count on her. It was rather sharp work, and I'm not what you might call a fascinating chap. But I simply couldn't wait. It's the most amazing luck——"

He broke off as if he had come into actual collision

with her thought. For nearly half a minute she endured the challenging scrutiny of his gaze. Then: "Mother, what's up?" he asked, in a changed voice. "Aren't you going to congratulate me?"

She drew in a steadying breath. He had given her a cue that made plain speaking a shade less difficult.

"My darling boy," she said quietly, "I've never played at pretences with you and I can't do it now. You admit this has been sharp work. And, honestly, I wish you had waited. I should have thought better of your judgment and the quality of—your love."

He frowned sharply. "Oh Lord, I didn't come here for a preachment. The last thing one would expect from you. I suppose it means you've taken one of your prejudices against her."

"Dear, I don't *know* her yet. No more do you."

"Well, anyway, I love her. Strikes me that's the straightest road to knowledge. And as she loves me——"

"Did she tell you so, Mark—quite unmistakably?"

"Well, of course," he retorted with rising temper; and was suddenly confronted by the realisation that Bel had done nothing of the kind. The discovery made him angrier than ever; but there was no untruthfulness in him. "I don't know about unmistakably. You don't expect a girl to make passionate declarations. Isn't the fact of her accepting me proof enough for any one?"

"*Is* it?" Lady Forsyth had herself in hand now, and she could not forego her one chance of candour even while she perceived the futility of reasoning

with a man in his exalted state. "Don't you realise that, in your case, there are . . . other factors? Your position, your title . . ."

"My—? Great Scott!" He stood speechless. The thing had simply not occurred to him. Title and position were, for him, as much a matter of course as the hair on his head. Then, as surprise subsided, anger flared up again. "Upon my soul, Mother, I don't know what's come to you. One would hardly think it was from *you* I'd learnt to credit people with the best motives. Are you trying to insinuate that she may have fooled me? Accepted all my worldly goods under a pretence of caring——?"

"No: not pretence," she interrupted, with a flash of impatience. "How *can* I make myself clear to you if you won't let me finish a sentence? I meant that your sudden infatuation—I can call it nothing else—might very well turn any girl's head and tempt her to imagine herself in love with you when she is really in love with the whole thing—flattered—attracted——"

"Mother, be quiet! I *will* not hear you!" There was pain as well as anger in the cry. "You don't understand her. You won't try to understand her. You're simply jealous—prejudiced. And I was counting on you—oh, confound it all——"

He swung round on his heel and strode away from her that she might not see how deeply he was wounded by the failure of one who had never failed him yet.

And she, feeling suddenly exhausted, sank down on the sofa near which she had been standing; her lips compressed, her face strained and hard.

The silence lasted little more than a minute; but to both it seemed interminable. Their deep and real devotion had never been less apparent than now; yet, even in that antagonistic pause, each knew it unshaken, unshakable, by anything that either might say or do. Hence its infinite capacity for inflicting pain.

Mark remained standing by the window; and Lady Forsyth's answer, when it came, was addressed to the unpromising outline of his back and shoulders.

"If you won't hear me, Mark, there is no more to be said. It has been difficult enough to speak at all at such a moment——"

"Then I wish to God you'd held your tongue," he flashed round upon her. "You haven't succeeded in shaking my faith—in her. You've only taken the shine out of the happiest day of my life. If that's any consolation to you!"

Without giving her time to answer he swung out of the room; and the trivial fact that he refrained from slamming the door seemed cruelly to emphasise that his words had not been spoken in temper, but wrung from him by the bitterness of disappointment and hurt pride.

For a time she remained as he had left her, sitting very still and upright, looking into vacancy. Then she covered her face and bowed her head upon the carved end of the sofa. But no tears came. She would not suffer them. She was still too angry with Fate, with Mark, and, above all, with the girl who had so transformed him. And tears, after forty, hurt too poignantly to bring relief. She was suffering, merely, and realising the power of those words,

spoken by them both in the heat of the spirit, to disfigure the finer fabric of their lives. Between two natures equally frank and fiery, lightning flashes of temper were inevitable; but never before had they revealed such threatening depths of division. Worst of all, that division could not be hidden from others. The fact and the reason would be obvious to them all: a thought intolerable to her sensitive pride that shrank from scrutiny even of sympathetic eyes.

And to-morrow—and to-morrow——?

The ghost of a shiver ran through her. Life with an estranged Mark and an unloved daughter-in-law was the last impossibility. She was a fool to have spoken while the ardour and thrill of possession were so fresh upon him. Yet, had she kept silence, he would eventually have forced the truth from her. It was the price of her proudest achievement; but it cannot be said that she paid it willingly——

At this point her thoughts were checked by the sound of his footstep. She might have known he would come. Instantly she was on her feet: her heart too full of relief for any thought of what she should say.

Outside the door he paused—and she held her breath. Then, very gently, he turned the handle and came in.

The temper had gone out of his face but not the pain. He came straight up to her and set both hands on her shoulders. "Mother, I'm sorry," he said simply. "I was a brute. But one doesn't expect unfairness from you."

"Darling, it was clumsy of me—I didn't mean to be unfair," she answered, grasping his wrists. "But

it's always been the truth between us. I couldn't insult you with empty insincerities."

"And it didn't strike you that you were insulting *her?*"

His fervent stress on the pronoun was indiscreet, to say the least of it, and Lady Forsyth winced visibly.

"Mums, don't be a fool," he said, with gruff tenderness, gently pressing her down on to the sofa. "If you're going to start with being jealous——"

"It's not jealousy, Mark."

"Then what the deuce is it?"

One thought sprang to both their minds, but neither could or would speak it.

"We've got to know where we stand about this business," Mark went on. "If you're going to dislike and distrust her, the position's impossible. The trouble is, she suspects something of the sort. But of course I told her it was all rot. Mother, you simply *must* be good to her. She seems to have had a pretty rank time of it with her own people."

"In what way?"

"D'you really care to hear?"

"Of course I do, seeing how vitally her past concerns your future."

Mark grimaced indulgently. "Can't you drop me and take a little decent interest in her?"

"I'll try—if you'll give me a chance! What about her people, and this Miss O'Neill? I've often wondered——"

He told her, in clipped phrases, pacing to and fro, as his habit was when moved or trying to express his

thoughts. He seldom sat down except to eat or read; and always seemed most completely himself when squarely planted on his feet.

His version of Bel's very mixed experiences—glorified inevitably—failed to dispel his mother's instinctive sense of something lacking in the girl, precisely what, it was too soon to tell.

"Poor child!" she said, when he had finished. "I wonder—how old is she?"

Mark frowned. "I haven't the remotest. We didn't exchange birth certificates. About five-and-twenty——"

"More than that."

"Well, if she was forty it would make no earthly difference," he retorted. "The point is—will you be decent to her, if it's only for my sake? She doesn't seem ever to have had a home worth mentioning. I want her to feel she has a real one here."

She sighed and rose to her feet. "Darling, I'll do my best." A deep metallic sound vibrated through the house—" Good gracious! There's dinner and I haven't changed."

"Who cares? You look awfully sweet in that blue thing. Come along."

He slipped a hand through her arm and led her out on to the landing. But at the head of the stairs he paused. A vision of Sheila skimming down the lower flight reminded him sharply that there were others to be told. There were also congratulations to be endured.

"I say, Mums, you might go ahead and break the ice," he said, giving her a gentle forward push. "I feel most beastly shy of them all."

Shyness was the least part of her own acute discomfort; but the obedience of a wife is as nothing to that of a well-trained mother. So she went before to do his bidding; and, being a mother, she would not have had it otherwise. Indeed the boyish request, following upon his casual compliment, seemed to bring her nearer to him than she had felt for days.

But in spite of her good services, Mark found dinner, flavoured with discreet congratulations, a singularly unappetising meal. His mother's doubtful attitude worried him more than he cared to confess. Amongst the others also, he felt—or imagined—a lack of genuine sympathy in the air; and the obvious word "congratulation" was conspicuous by its absence. Pure accident, no doubt; but it jarred. Of a sudden he felt vaguely "out of it," and more than a little aggrieved that his happiness—which should have added the perfecting touch to their summer party—seemed instead to have put things indefinably out of gear.

Matters were not much better in the drawing-room after dinner—the friendliest hour of the day at Inveraig. Keith took up a book. Lady Forsyth obliterated herself behind the *Times;* and Sheila, soon after the men came in, slipped quietly out of the room. Ralph, kicking his heels on the window-seat, proposed Bridge. Mark refused without ceremony; and Maurice proceeded to monopolise Miss Videlle, by way of reward for duty done.

Mark, in his highly strung mood, felt unjustifiably annoyed with them all, and the more he suspected their lack of sympathy the more his chivalrous nature swerved towards Bel. He gave it up at last and

decided to go to The Rowans. There at least he would be welcome and could talk naturally.

"I'm going for a stroll, Mother," he announced to the vast expanse of the *Times*. "Leave something unlocked if I'm late."

He wondered—would Keith offer to accompany him? But Keith made no move.

In the hall his happy impulse was checked by the recollection of Harry—probably antagonistic and quite certain to speak her mind without reserve. His unexpected appearance might only make things difficult for Bel. He felt checked at every turn.

"Oh damn it all!" he muttered aloud, and in the same breath caught sight of Sheila coming slowly downstairs.

The light falling on her from above burnished the outward sweeping waves of her dark hair, made shadowed mysteries of her eyes, and luminously caressed the curves of her face, that, like her voice, was at once clear-cut and soft. Her high-waisted, silver-grey gown added a cubit to her stature; and Mark, watching her unperceived, was smitten afresh by her natural wild-flower grace, the very antithesis of Bel's more exotic charm. Seen thus, Sheila looked no less than beautiful; but Mark's mind, just then, was concentrated on Bel. If only he could enlist Sheila's championship, the girl would have twice the chance with his mother.

Straightway he resolved on a direct appeal, and going quickly forward, planted himself on the mat, one hand grasping the balustrade.

She started and came to a standstill two steps above him, so that their eyes were almost level.

"What is it? Mums wanting me?" she asked, and he thought she looked paler than usual, but perhaps it was only the light.

"No. *I* am though," he said, with his usual directness. "Are you frightfully busy? Or frightfully bored with me and my engagement?"

"Neither," she answered, a smile flickering in her eyes. "Why?"

"Well, the rest seem to be. And mother was quite upset. I had no end of a scene with her."

"Poor darling!" Sheila murmured distressfully, and Mark made a whimsical grimace.

"Which? Her or me?"

Her pallor vanished. "Mums, of course. Still, I'm sorry all round. It'll spoil things for you both."

"Rather! But I'm thinking you could do a deal to smooth matters, Sheila—if you choose. It's Bel, I'm bothered about. I want you all to make her feel welcome. And things don't look promising so far. Come out for a stroll, will you! I've a lot to say."

"I'd love to."

He stood back to make way for her, and as she reached his side his hand closed lightly on her arm. "Sure you'll be warm enough in this?" he said.

She nodded and went rather quickly on before him into the garden.

Avoiding the terrace, they turned into a coppice of birch and pine, and so passed out on to an open stretch of heather, duskily purple and bronze in the fading light.

Mark did most of the talking, and—in the repetition of her story to more sympathetic ears—Bel shone

out with fresh lustre as the heroine of a plucky, if somewhat erratic, fight against the tyranny of circumstance and unfavourable early surroundings.

Sheila listened to it all in her quietly intent fashion that was balm to the excitable natures of both mother and son. She had the true gift for listening, which is even rarer than the gift of speech; and for Mark her silence had a quality of its own. It was a living thing, alert and aware. When a man felt worried it seemed to distil a sympathy that called for no embarrassing response. And her brief contributions to their talk were more than satisfactory.

Of course she would love his Bel as a sister, and "Mums" would be sure to come round in time. To doubt it were a poor compliment to Bel, she reminded him; and he wondered how he had overlooked that obvious truth.

Only once she spoke of herself. "You know, I'm afraid," she said, "however well things turn out, Mums will never quite be able to put her in my place. And I'm also afraid . . . ," she hesitated and looked up at him, "that I wouldn't have it otherwise."

"No more would I," he agreed, with sudden fervour. "You belong—to us both. And you always will."

When, at length, darkness and falling dew drove them in, she had charmed him completely from his mood of vague doubt and irritation. But for the new name on his lips, and the stir of excitement in his veins, it was almost as if they were the Mark and Sheila of a month ago: almost—but not quite.

In the hall he held out his hand. "I'd rather not go in there again. Tell them I haven't gone out,

will you?" He paused. "I'm a rotten hand at saying things, Sheila. But, somehow, you've made everything look different. And you'll square mother all right. I can trust you."

He grasped her hand harder than he realised; but she bore it without wincing.

"Yes, Mark," she said, "you can trust me. I'll do my very best."

And none knew better than he the measure of her very best. He ran upstairs with a lighter heart. One could rely on Sheila, though the heavens fell; and his doubts—as she had said—were an injustice to Bel, who would probably twist them all—including his mother—round her little finger, once she set herself to the task. His last thought was of their meeting on the morrow. But it was Sheila's face, softly radiant in the lamplight, that perversely haunted his dreams.

CHAPTER VI

"Where beauty's veil doth cover every blot,
And all things turn to fair that eyes can see! . . .
Both grace and faults are loved of more and less:
Thou makest faults graces that to thee resort."

SHAKESPEARE.

MARK stepped back from his modelling pedestal and critically surveyed the result of his morning's work —a terra-cotta study of Contemplation, inspired by his vision of Bel under the birch-tree on that day of very mixed memories which seemed infinitely more than two weeks ago.

The small statue, classic in its serenity and simplicity of treatment, was a perfect thing of its kind; as unlike the bulk of Mark's rugged, individual studies as Bel's whole attitude to life was unlike his own. Every line of it rested the eye, even as the girl's cool deliberate nature rested his own ceaselessly questing brain.

So far he had found no trace in her of the hidden conflict between spirit and matter that was the keynote of his art. Already he recognised her spasmodic rebellions rather as a series of skilful evasions that implied no deep questioning of life or desire of knowledge. She was not a genuine rebel, like Miss O'Neill. Almost he suspected her of being an impressionist in life. But doubts and discoveries notwith-

standing, the charm still held, and would probably continue to hold—irrespective of anything that she might be or do. Incidentally, she was proving herself an admirable model. This was the third morning he had victimised her, and she was still enduring it with the patience of a Griselda; still sitting, as she had sat for a good hour, on a long low stool at the far end of the room, in a blue wrapper with falling sleeves that revealed her arms. Elbows on knees, chin cradled in her hand—was she thinking, dreaming, or mildly bored? He would have asked her had they been alone. But Lenox was ensconced in the deep window-seat behind him, working at a post-impressionist pastel—a challenge to Mark's insistence on the classic note.

"Tired—are you?" he asked instead; and she gave him a sidelong glance with the slow lift of her lashes that still stirred him, though he knew it now for a conscious trick of manner. "Could you hang on for another fifteen minutes without a serious collapse?"

"I could—just; if I may have a cigarette directly it's over." Mark, as well she knew, held ridiculously old-fashioned opinions on that subject, and a cigarette just before lunch was the depth of demoralisation.

"I call that taking a mean advantage," he reproved her without severity. "But I admit you've earned it."

"A very sustaining admission! And the prospect of getting it is more sustaining still."

Her cool, provocative smile made him confound Lenox for being present, which was precisely what

she intended. Then, with a sigh of resignation she, so to speak, absented herself, and her gaze reverted to a large and vigorous bas-relief that occupied the centre of a deep wall-shelf right before her.

It was a recent achievement; a thing of signal beauty and power, as magnificently impetuous as the figure on the table was gracious and controlled. It portrayed the death of a Viking self-immolated on the deck of his blazing barque in a storm off the coast of Norway. In the background, the savage peaks of the mainland were roughly indicated. The rest was a whirl of wind-battered clouds and waters, scrolls of smoke and twisted blades of fire that wreathed and devoured the doomed ship. Her prow, a Valkyrie with winged helmet and lifted spear, rode high on the crest of a wave, poised, as it were, for the flight to Valhalla when her hero on the sloping deck should have finished his last fight. And it was not finished yet. Raised on one elbow, his head flung upward, his long locks, beard, and eyebrows were blown abroad by the wind. He seemed less to be awaiting the stroke of death, than rejoicing in the majestic duel between the gods of fire and storm. Though dwarfed by his mighty surroundings, that dying fragment of flesh and bone and sinew dominated all—a serene and splendid figure of defiance; a symbol, finely conceived and wrought, of the unconquering yet unconquered spirit of man. That, for Mark, had been the inner significance of his theme, above and beyond his sheer joy in the swirl of the tempest, with one quenchless spark of human will and courage for the point of stillness in the midst.

For days, while working at it, he had scarcely been

off his feet or sat down to a meal, and his final spurt of inspiration had kept him going from breakfast-time one day till four o'clock next morning. The thing was unquestionably his finest achievement yet. He had put more of himself into it than into any work of his hands; and he wondered, now, whether Bel was seeing it merely as a vigorous bit of drama, or feeling it, understanding it, as every artist craves that his work should be felt and understood.

She had made few comments when first he showed her his studio, his inner self, except that she had not realised she was going to marry a genius and she hoped he was not one of the too uncomfortable kind. He had promptly reassured her by waiving all claim to genius and promising not to be "uncomfortable" if he could possibly avoid it. A faint, very faint, twinge at his heart had been loyally ignored; and before long she had charmed him—almost—into forgetfulness that it had ever been there.

Still, it could not be said that they made swift progress in intimacy. One day she would seem exquisitely near him, and the next would slip distractingly out of reach. At first this had puzzled him. Then he suspected it of being deliberate; and suspicion was tinged with resentment. He neither understood nor appreciated the feline element inherent in certain women. Nor did he relish the suspicion that at times Bel could, and did, play upon him, as a skilled musician plays upon an instrument; that she could even exasperate him to the point of fury without losing an iota of her charm. That charm she was at small pains to exercise on the other members of the household, except in the case of

Maurice and Ralph. With them it was instinctive, simply; with the rest it would have been something of an effort, which apparently was not worth making.

As regards Lady Forsyth—though Sheila had been better than her word—things did not, so far, look promising. Just at first, for Mark's sake, the two had made a genuine effort at friendliness; but on both sides the effort was so much more in evidence than the friendliness that they very soon found themselves tacitly avoiding any attempt at intimate talk. For this unhappy state of things Mark, not unnaturally, blamed his mother rather than Bel. She, after all, was the older woman. A convincing lead from her might have worked wonders; but the very sincerity he had always so loved in her had now become a stone of stumbling. That he could understand, being cast in the same mould. What he secretly resented was her blindness—wilful or otherwise—to Bel's charm; to the sweetness and goodness in her that would only, he fancied, blossom freely in an atmosphere of sympathetic appreciation, his mother's most notable gift. How deeply he had counted on this, he now began to realise; but for fear of hurting her and making matters worse, he bridled his tongue, with the result that he, too, found himself avoiding occasions for personal talk. His people, it seemed, could not, or would not, assimilate Bel; while Bel's whole attitude politely implied that she was marrying him, not his people. But they three—his mother, Keith, and Sheila—were so closely linked with his main interest in life that it was hard to see how matters would range themselves when it came to the point of marriage.

And he intended to marry soon. An engagement was an unsatisfactory state of affairs, and there was nothing to wait for that he could see——

"There! The fifteen minutes is up," he said suddenly, consulting his watch and stepping back again for another critical survey. "I won't keep you a second longer. She shall have her finishing touches to-morrow."

Bel rose, yawned, stretched herself gracefully at some length, and then stood smiling at him, hands clasped behind her head.

Maurice—unnoticed by Mark, but not by Bel—took up a fresh piece of paper and began a lightning sketch of her pose.

"You're a model of a model!" Mark commended her warmly. Then his gaze moved from her to the bas-relief, as if contrasting the two things he loved almost equally with two different sides of his nature.

"Have you made friends with my Viking?" he asked, and she pursed her lips as if considering.

"Frankly—I've tried to; but I can't. The wind of him blows even one's thoughts about. He's magnificent, of course. But too stormy and uncomfortable for my taste; so uncomfortable that I was rather wondering how you could have enjoyed doing him?"

Mark raised his eyebrows. "That doesn't lend itself to explanation," he said lightly. "Some sort of natural affinity, perhaps. I'm a bit stormy and uncomfortable myself, in certain moods." He opened his cigarette-case and held it out to her. "I apologise for blowing your thoughts about. We'll change your view to-morrow."

"Now you're angry!" she said sweetly, taking a cigarette and tapping it on the back of her hand. As she did so a half hoop of diamonds flashed into view. "Honesty's *not* the best policy, let the copy-books never so virtuously rage!"

"I prefer it anyway," he said. "Have a light." He struck a match and held it for her. "I hope my Lady of Dreams is more to your taste. She's warranted not to stir the ghost of a breeze in any one's thought!"

Bel came forward now and contemplated herself with undisguised satisfaction. "Mark, you *have* improved her. She's lovely!"

"Naturally. She can't help herself, bless her," he said under his breath, for the pure pleasure of calling up a blush. "Now then, Lenox," he added aloud, "have you the cheek to produce your caricature of my future wife?"

"Rather!" Maurice promptly held up for inspection a curious blur of blues and greens, of pale gold hair and flesh tints of doubtful fleshliness. After some looking, the suggestion of a woman emerged; and later still, a ghostly suggestion of Bel. It was unquestionably clever—and nothing more. Mark laughed aloud.

"Call that a portrait! By the yellow blob on the top one would just know which way to hang it!"

"Mark, you're very rude!" Bel waved him aside with her cigarette. "It's queer and perverse; but *I* rather like it."

Maurice sprang to his feet and executed a low bow. "Miss Alison, it is yours——"

He broke off and straightened himself, for the door

opened to admit Keith with the *Times* in his hand. "Your mother wants lunch at once," he said. "I'm driving her into Ardmuir early on business. Would you care to come?"

"Thanks no. We've a private picnic on, across the loch."

Mark glanced at the open sheet. "Any fresh news?"

"A few more details about that Irish shooting affray; an ugly, ominous business. While our precious politicians are hurling epithets at each other, things over there are rapidly drifting towards bloodshed on a big scale."

Mark's eyes flashed and he thrust out his chin. "If fighting's imminent, the sooner you and I pack our things and cross over to Belfast the better. At least we can help to stiffen the ranks."

"Mark—you don't *mean* that?" Bel broke in, a touch of sharpness in her startled tone.

"Every word of it," he answered quietly, and Macnair's long mouth twisted as he looked from one to the other. "I could name a dozen good fellows here who'd come with me like a shot."

"But—what do *you* know about soldiering?"

He laughed. "More than you think for. I've been put through my paces in the O.T.C. I can ride; I can flag-wag; and I'm a marksman, which is very much to the point. You've not discovered all my talents yet by any means!"

But Bel was scarcely listening. Her eyes were on Keith, whom already she recognised as an authority on most things, including Mark himself.

"You're not really going, are you, Mr. Macnair?"

she asked in a tone of faint dismay. "The Government would surely never let it get as far as civil war."

Keith, more charmed than he cared to own, reassured her with his kindliest smile. "I sincerely hope not, Miss Alison, for all our sakes. This Austrian ultimatum to Serbia may very well set Europe ablaze; and at such a moment we should be worse than fools to start cutting each other's throats at home."

Bel looked distinctly relieved. In spite of her American phase, she remained essentially an islander. For her, Europe was a vast vague region across the Channel, chiefly represented by Paris and the Riviera. But with Mark it was otherwise.

"I say, Keith," he asked sharply. "Is that Serbian business really going to make things buzz? I've done no more than squint at headlines lately. And we've had such a surfeit of 'Wolf, Wolf!' one gets a bit sceptical!"

Keith smiled. "When you can find time to 'squint' at two letters I've had from Vienna and Rome, you'll be sceptical no longer. If Austria wrings the last humiliation from little Serbia, Russia will be in it; which means France will be in it too——"

"In *what*, Mr. Macnair?" Bel's relief was swiftly evaporating.

"The conflagration of Europe," Keith said gravely; and the plain statement sent an odd, uncomfortable thrill through them all.

"But we're not Europe. It would not mean us?"

Keith gave her a direct look. "In my opinion, Miss Alison, we *are* Europe and it would mean us. Unless we recognise that obvious fact in time, we shall simply be marched over. Whether our reigning

politicians will take your view or mine, remains to be proved.—But there goes the gong. And we must feed, though dynasties fall!"

He hurried out and Maurice followed him.

As the door closed on them, Mark, in his silent, impetuous fashion, turned and took the girl in his arms. "Poor darling! Did I frighten her badly?"

"No. You made her very angry!" she answered, in her most seductive voice; and for all apology he kissed her passionately.

"It *will* be all right, won't it?" she questioned, still in her childlike vein.

"God knows. I hope it will," he said. "Anyway, if we *are* sitting on a live crater, we'll take our fill of peace and sunshine this afternoon. Come along!"

But at lunch there was more disturbing talk about Ireland. Mark still spoke of going over if the tension snapped, though Bel had taken his caresses for a sign of grace. Ralph clamoured to accompany him. Sheila threatened to beg, borrow, or steal a uniform and go with them. As for Lady Forsyth she seemed as bad as any one. A spot of colour in each cheek heightened the blue of her eyes. She felt the whole tragic tangle of right and wrong keenly, vividly, as she felt everything, from a pin-prick to an earthquake in the antipodes; and, like all truly imaginative natures, she could sink the personal point of view when larger issues held the field. Bel, very wisely, kept silence. Anything she might have to say on the subject was for one ear alone. Meantime, she privately reiterated her opinion that Lady Forsyth was an odd, uncomfortable sort of person, quite unworthy to be the mother of Mark.

Lunch ended, the "uncomfortable person" retreated to her turret-room to write a couple of notes before starting, and thither Mark followed her—an event so rare these days that she started when the door opened and he came in.

"Mother," he plunged as usual, "the others were mostly joking at lunch. But I meant what I said. Did you?"

She looked up quickly, and her eyes caressed his fine, strong face. "Of course I did."

"Thought so. You *are* a real sportswoman, Mums."

She sighed and smiled almost in one breath. "A fair imitation! I shall pray more fervently than ever for a peaceful solution. Besides—" a tentative pause —"How about Bel?"

"*She'd* be all right. Why shouldn't she?"

But the touch of sharpness in his tone betrayed him—and Bel also. "You might credit her with a few good qualities. She's got as many as most people if you'd honestly look for them. But you won't."

"Dear, that's not true. You might try and be fair to me. I've done my best."

"So has she, no doubt, though you probably haven't noticed it. But it seems precious little use either way. So the less said the better." He swung round and took a step toward the door.

"Oh, Mark!" she murmured, and checked herself. He was right. Words only widened the breach. But the low sound brought him back to her side. "Mums," he said, a hand on her shoulder, "is this rotten state of things always going on between us?"

"Oh, I hope not." She laid her fingers over his. "'My faith is large in time.' We two impatient

folk must manage to have patience with each other. The trouble is—forgive me, dear—I can find so little in her to take hold of. It's rather like trying to grasp a cloud. Later on I may arrive at the substance that must be there!"

"Yes, it's *there* right enough." Mark's tone was curiously quiet, considering how she had dared. "Are you yet convinced, Mother, that she cares, or do you still believe she's marrying my title and possessions?"

Lady Forsyth started. "Have you any doubt yourself?"

"If I have, it's all your fault. What d'you really think? Tell me."

"I think she cares more now than she did at first, though not nearly so much as she ought to before she becomes your wife. You've won her, nominally, by the primitive process of snatching. But you've yet to win her actually. So don't be in a hurry to snatch at marriage. You're still comparative strangers. Give yourselves a year at least."

"Oh Lord!" he groaned, "I was thinking of Christmas. I'm blest if I could keep it up for a year."

"Keep up—what?" she asked, amused and amazed.

"Oh—you know!" he flung out an expressive hand. "This lovering business. I'm not much of a hand at the sentimental touch. Little compliments and attentions and all that. *Your* fault again! You haven't reared me that way. Mind you, it's not that I don't care——"

"Of course not!" Her amusement was full of understanding. "It's only that you're even more of a Scot than I thought you were! Poor Bel!"

"Not a bit of it!" he retorted; but that first touch

of sympathy pleased him. "I believe I'm improving. But—after marriage, she wouldn't expect so much—eh?"

"She might—and she might not. Women mostly do. And when they marry the non-lovering type of Scot—they suffer. A friend of mine—an Irishwoman and childless—was so completely withered by ten years of life with a dour and devoted Scottish husband that she simply had to leave him, and to this day he doesn't understand why."

"Hurry up, Helen! What's come to you?" Keith's voice rang out from the stairs; and Lady Forsyth leapt to her feet. "Bad boy to delay me like this! But do give yourself time to get your hand in. Promise."

He smiled at her characteristic urgency. She looked ridiculously, engagingly young, he thought, in her blue motor bonnet with its long veil floating over her shoulder, and the eyes that answered his smile were suspiciously bright. Obeying a rare impulse, he stooped and kissed them. "Well—just to please you," he said, "I'll try and hang on till Easter."

"Bless you!" she whispered. Then she waved to him from the threshold and was gone.

For several minutes he stood there looking round the familiar room—that still seemed alive with her presence—in a very mixed frame of mind. It was puzzling, and it hardly seemed right somehow; but the fact remained that, even now, this vivid, virile little mother of his was easily the biggest thing in his life. To please her he had promised to wait till Easter. Rather an unflattering discrepancy, when

you came to think of it, between nine months' engagement and his original proposal to marry in a week. And, with a sudden twinge of compunction, he hurried out in search of Bel.

CHAPTER VII

"Gentle thou art, and therefore to be won,
Beauteous thou art, therefore to be assailéd;
And when a woman woos, what woman's son
Will sourly leave her till she have prevailéd?"

SHAKESPEARE.

THAT picnic on the farther shore of the loch marked a definite step in the progress of their intimacy.

Bel, in a distinctly coming-on disposition, proved herself at once a more enchanting and disturbing possession than Mark had found her hitherto. First she must discover a hollow full of bracken for his "arm-chair"; then she must take possession of the tea-basket and proceed to "play at being married" with all the airy innocence of nineteen. But nineteen never could have worked so simply yet skilfully on a man's heartstrings that, before their idyllic meal was over, the man in question found himself more than half regretting that promise to his mother. It was almost as if Bel had guessed at his defection and set out to punish him.

When tea was over he proffered his cigarette case. "More demoralisation, I suppose?"

"No; the reward of virtue!" she said, deftly extracting one with each hand.

"I say! Sheer greed! What about virtue being its own reward?"

She wrinkled her nose very prettily. "Can't say I've ever found it so. But then—I'm not overburdened with virtue. So I'm entitled to the reward!"

"Not in that form. You're my wife this afternoon!"

"So you can be as hectoring as you please? At that rate I vote we remain engaged to the end of the chapter!"

"Bel—if you talk like that, I'll marry you tomorrow," he threatened her, tempted beyond endurance; but she was gravely considering her two cigarettes. Then, lifting her lashes, she regarded him with lazy tenderness. "I'll be very good," she said, "and give up one of them in exchange—for a kiss!"

Thus challenged he seized her and kissed her vehemently—lips, eyes, and hair.

"Oh—oh!" she breathed, half in ecstasy, half in remonstrance; and he desisted without releasing her.

"You brought it on yourself," he said huskily. "Bel—you're a witch. You *do* know how to make a man crazy for you."

Her sigh expressed contentment unabashed. But she seemed chiefly concerned with the cigarette in her left hand. It was crumpled into a limp wreck.

"There now, you've killed the poor thing," she said, holding it up for his inspection. "And I might just as well have enjoyed it. Do look at Bobs over there, disapproving visibly of your behaviour."

Mark looked; and the Irish terrier's stump of a tail moved to and fro in small jerks. The rest of him remained motionless, watchful, nose between paws, obviously prepared for active intervention, if need arose.

"Good old Bobs!" murmured Mark; and two velvet ears, several shades darker than the chestnut head, twitched in response, as who should say: "I appreciate the attention, but we can't enjoy ourselves properly till we're rid of her."

Bel snapped her fingers in friendly invitation. But he paid no heed. "He's quite uncomfortably human, that dog, and he hasn't accepted me yet. He's a jealous red-head, like his master—almost as jealous as his master's mother!"

"Why do you think she's jealous?" Mark asked, instinctively on the defensive at the mention of her name.

"I don't think. I know. It's quite natural. I should be horribly jealous—of *my* son."

"You would—would you?" he asked in a changed voice; and she, resting her head against him, answered nothing. Possibly she thought the allusion might induce him to speak more definitely of their marriage; but he merely continued to hold her, more gently now, and to stroke her ruffled hair.

For several minutes they remained thus, thinking their own curiously divergent thoughts. Then by degrees she drew herself away, laid the crumpled cigarette on his knee and put the other between her lips. "Light, please," she said, and as he held the match for her, she looked searchingly into his eyes.

"Bel—" he began vehemently; but she checked him with a gesture. "Pax! I want to enjoy my cigarette unmolested. Tell me more about the Hampshire home. I've heard next to nothing about it yet."

She settled herself to listen, hands lightly clasped

round her knees, her eyes gazing dreamily out over the water. Like all women who pose habitually and instinctively, she had the art of seeming more natural than genuine simplicity can ever appear. And she had touched the right spring. If Mark loved any place in the world better than Inveraig, it was Wynchcombe Friars. His feeling for both was too personal, too deep-seated to be articulate; but he could at least describe externals; and he did it well. He told her of the long, rambling Elizabethan house, with its oak panelling and dark roof beams; of the great flagged terrace, flanked by moss-covered urns, overlooking a forest of Scotch firs that trooped down into the valley and climbed the opposite ridge in massed battalions.

"Outside my bedroom and studio windows," he said, "there's a very sea of pine tops, sinking into the hollow and rising again till they are splashed like dark foam against the sky. Magnificent trees. Most of 'em hundreds of years old. And the charm of it is that, on the other side of our ridge, behind the house, we drop down into typical English country: meadows and park land, and the Wynch flowing lazily through it; great lonely beeches and oaks, with all space to spread themselves in, and the grand old ruins of Wynchcombe Abbey. You'll simply love it. I'm longing to take you all over it."

"I'm longing too. It sounds very beautiful," she said with feeling; then paused, as if picturing the scene. But her feminine brain was revolving matters more practical than pine forests and ruined abbeys.

"Horses to ride?" she asked casually.

"Yes; and to drive. We're not motor-folk really.

But mother succumbed to one at last for long distances."

"I'm glad. I love motoring. Are you within reasonable distance of town?"

"Seven miles from a branch line station and bad connections. We usually motor to the main line thirteen miles off. But we're not great Londoners, either of us. We've too much that's keenly interesting on the spot."

"Rather narrowing, isn't it?"

"I haven't found it so."

Again she was silent, contemplating the blurred beauty of inverted hills in the loch.

"And Wynchcombe Friars," she asked, "would be our main residence?"

"Well—where else?" he said, smiling at her pensive profile and wondering what she was driving at. "There's only this, besides. This is mother's little place—a legacy from a bachelor godfather. I don't run to half a dozen establishments."

"But surely"—she turned to him now, half eager, half anxious—"surely you have a house in town?"

"Rather not. Don't want it, and couldn't afford it. I'm not a cocoa or a patent medicine millionaire. Keeping up two estates—though Inveraig is not large—takes a fair amount of money. And I've put a good deal into our arts and crafts centre."

Her face fell so noticeably that he slipped a consoling hand through her arm. "Poor little girl! Is it a house in town she's after?"

"Well, naturally I"—she coloured a little—"I thought—you kind of people always went the regular round—London, Scotland, and the country."

North Ireland in her; and there's a link between Ulster and the south-west of Scotland that only those who belong there quite understand. In very old days, the two coasts were so close, at points, that men could row to and fro in ordinary sea-boats. And it's not a purely Irish quarrel, Bel. It's of the first importance that the United Kingdom should remain united—especially just now. Nothing would suit Germany better than Home Rule and 'Ireland-a-nation' before she throws off her mask. Personally, I admit I'm keen for a share in the scrap, if it comes to scrapping. I've the blood of fighters in my veins. But of course—if you're dead against it——"

"I *am* dead against it," she said, softly implacable, edging closer still. "And *you're* too strong to be obstinate. Mark—you're not going to refuse the first thing I seriously ask you to do for me?"

Her low-toned tenderness disarmed him utterly. "No, I'm *not*," he said, with sudden vehemence, drawing her to him. "I won't go to Ireland, Bel. No need to worry any more."

With a sigh of relief, she put her free arm round his shoulder, lifted her head, and kissed him on the lips. It was the first time she had done so spontaneously; and, at the moment, it eased considerably his bitter sense of disappointment. He said nothing, however, and for the rest of the evening Bel was all tenderness and simplicity; not a shadow of coquetry to mar the effect.

"I think my concession deserves a special reward," he said later on, as he grounded the boat under In-

veraig, and handed her ashore. "You might chuck your Harry for once and come on up to dinner."

But she demurred at that. Honestly she couldn't chuck Harry to-night. Considering Harry's views and her devotion and her resentment, she was taking it all beautifully—in the intervals. "She's done more for me in three years," Bel concluded, "than my own people have in the rest of my life. So you oughtn't to grudge her the crumbs that fall from your table! You've monopolised me all day; and she hates being alone in the evening."

"Bring her along then. *I* don't mind."

"Perhaps not, Mr. Egoist. But she would. She wants me to herself, just as you do. Don't you see?"

Mark grimaced. "No, I don't see. A couple of women. Morbid rot! Mother says the Suffrage business is increasing that sort of thing. I'll be glad to get you out of the atmosphere and away from all that rescue work of hers."

"But, Mark, it's splendid work——"

"Of course it is, for her. Quite unsuitable, though, for you. If you really won't come up, I'll see you home."

No, she really wouldn't. She was resolute on that point.

"Your people up there have had enough of me to-day," she added, smiling into his dissatisfied face. "They're like Bobs. They haven't quite accepted me yet. And—honestly, I don't seem to catch on, somehow, except with Mr. Lenox——"

"Not Sheila?" he asked, a little anxiously. "I'm very keen you two should be good friends."

"She evidently knows that, and she's doing her best. She's sweetness itself to me. But still——"

"Well? What's wrong with her?" He was on the defensive again.

"My dear, there's nothing wrong. If there was, she'd probably be twice as charming. She's the kind of tranquil angel who would show up beautifully against a tragic background. But, in ordinary life, she seems almost too good to be true."

"She's nothing of the kind," he retorted hotly, which did not improve matters. But for the life of him, he could not keep cool. "She's the right sort all through."

"Well, if she's such a living wonder, why on earth don't you marry her instead of me?" Bel countered with perfect good temper.

"For a very obvious reason, which you don't deserve to be told in so many words."

"Mark, you're horrid!" she pushed him lightly with her shoulder. "Don't let's spoil our beautiful afternoon squabbling over a side issue. No doubt we shall shake down together in the end. Only give us time."

Her sweet reasonableness disarmed him—for the moment. But he was a long while falling off to sleep that night. Things did not easily worry him; but within the last twelve hours several events of more than minor importance had conspired to that end.

First, Bel's frankness made it clear that at Inveraig she found no atmosphere of genuine welcome or of home. He must give them time, as she had said; but it was an unpropitious start. Second, he had, in effect, saddled himself with two promises that

would be far from easy to keep. Third, there was the unwelcome prospect of that possible flat in town. If Bel seriously set her heart on it, he did not see himself refusing her; though goodness knew where the money was coming from, or how he was going to survive large doses of London society. Son of a mother who treated life as an art, he lacked the herd-instinct of the social type. But for all her indulgence, and his own imperious ways, he was not radically selfish; and beneath his blunt, Scottish exterior there dwelt a deep, natural tenderness for woman, as woman, common to the essentially masculine man.

Marriage, he supposed, meant compromise; and he began to see that, with Bel for wife, he would have to do his full share of it. Looking back over their "beautiful afternoon," he was uncomfortably aware of certain fundamental discords; still more aware that his mother had been right in several respects. It was an annoying trick of hers. She had been right about Ulster; about Bel's eye to worldly advantage; even about the minor matter of her age. For Mark had discovered, incidentally, that she was twenty-nine in June, two years older than himself. Not that a year or so mattered this way or that. But it was an additional score for his mother; and gave greater weight to her curious antipathy to the girl of his choice.

His disappointment about Ulster was keener even than he cared to admit; and here again—as his acutely wide-awake brain recalled words and looks and tones—a sudden vexatious doubt assailed him. Had her tenderly urgent request been as spontaneous as it seemed: a genuine response to his question

"So we do; the social sort. Mother and I aren't the social sort. I didn't suppose you were either."

"I haven't had half a chance. But I'd like to be. A flat wouldn't ruin you, would it, Mark? Just for the season."

This time it was his face that fell. "Oh Lord! I could never stick out a London season, Bel. The very best time in the country too."

"And *I* could never exist all the year round out of town." She stated the fact sweetly but with entire conviction.

"Hang it all! This is rather a serious state of lookin[illegible]!" he said, with a lightness he was far from the valley [illegible]e must see if we can't effect a compro- battalions.

"Outside my b[illegible]emembered his mother's words a said, "there's a ver[illegible]mpulsively he spoke his thought. the hollow and rising [illegible]—you've been let in; accepted dark foam against the sk[illegible]tences——"

of 'em hundreds of years [illegible]reated, pain and passion in is that, on the other side [illegible]e accepted."

house, we drop down into t[illegible]u find me? That's all meadows and park land, and th[illegible]her arm. "You do through it; great lonely beeches[illegible]nply a case of 'L'un space to spread themselves in, a

ruins of Wynchcombe Abbey. You[illegible]curable coquette I'm longing to take you all over it." [illegible] smile.

"I'm longing too. It sounds very [illegible]life," she said, said with feeling; then paused, as if [illegible]eceive than to scene. But her feminine brain was revo[illegible]er precipitate more practical than pine forests and ru[illegible]nd the fact

"Horses to ride?" she asked casually. [illegible]r kisses?"

"Yes; and to drive. We're not motor[illegible] shrug.

"Well—if it's more practical proof you're wanting" —she hesitated, then turned full upon him, her languor discarded like a garment. "I simply can't bear this crazy talk about going to Ulster. It's no earthly concern of yours. Mark—darling, *don't* go, even if they are fools enough to fight."

She leaned urgently towards him. Her whole sweet face looked younger, tenderer, more appealing than he had seen it since that momentous afternoon in the glen. So swift, so surprising was her change of front, that he looked openly dismayed.

"You don't seem very keen on practical proofs after all," she said, bringing her face a shade nearer to his. "I did think your mother would have the sense to discourage you."

He shook his head. "Mother understands."

"That really means she gives in to your every whim. It's the way mothers are made. Specially when they own a son with a chin like yours! But the modern wife isn't quite so accommodating. And I suppose my feeling about it counts for something?"

"Of course it does—tremendously."

"Then say you won't go; and there'll be no more bother."

He thrust out his formidable chin and looked across the loch with troubled eyes.

"Darling," she persisted, "where's the *point* of mixing yourself up with a purely Irish quarrel?"

He shrugged his shoulders, still keeping his eyes away from her face.

"I suppose—a natural prompting of the blood. Mother's a Stuart, of these parts, with a strain of

blind guides who had been sedulously whittling down the fighting strength of the British Isles.

"Hullo! The fat's in the fire," he remarked coolly, having pulled in his chair and opened the *Scotsman* with his customary deliberation. "The voice is the voice of Jacob; but the hand is the hand of Esau."

It was Lady Forsyth, standing behind him, who exclaimed and read out snatches from the Summary of Contents with heightened colour and quickened breath.

Though Keith had all the natural man's objection to these peculiarly feminine methods, he bore the infliction without a murmur, till Mark, towering behind his mother, took her waist between his hands and propelled her towards the sputtering kettle.

"Steady on, Mums, and feed your sheep," he commanded, standing guard over her. "Your righteous wrath will only give you indigestion, and the elderly gentlemen who are engineering this eruption won't be one penny the worse."

"And you ought to be grateful to them really!" Mona remarked, with a wicked twinkle. "What about the German invasion you were praying for?"

They all "ragged" her, young and old. She was irresistible; and unquenchable.

"Well, at least we can fight invading Germans, and we couldn't fight the petticoats!" she retorted, while Mark thrust a caddy spoon into her inattentive hand. "But it still remains to be seen whether our *pax vobiscums* will permit us to hurt a single hair of a single 'kindred Teuton' head!"

The tea was made by now, thanks chiefly to Mark; and for five minutes she managed to concentrate her

attention on cups and saucers. But throughout the meal they could talk of little else than the veiled drama of the nations and its probable developments. Mark himself was rather quieter than usual; but perhaps he thought the more.

When the younger ones went out on to the terrace, he followed Keith into the study, and for some time the two—who were as brothers in all but blood—sat together in a smoky, companionable silence, each absorbed in his own printed sheet. The Irish news was by no means reassuring. But Mark, to Keith's surprise, had tacitly dropped the subject; and it was the older man who spoke first.

"I'd give something for a glimpse, this minute, into Germany's barracks and her sacred Kiel Canal. If I know anything of the Kaiser and his gang, she's on the move already; counting on our neutrality of course. God send she may find herself mistaken; but Grey will leave no stone unturned to avoid war. As a philosopher and a man of letters, I'm with him there. But the rest of me is convinced that nothing short of Treitschke's 'terrible medicine' will shake us out of our democratic fiddle-faddling and partisan squabbling. It would link up the men and women, not to mention the Empire; and as for the Irish—at the first hint of real business, they'd be falling on each other's necks. In that case, Mark, you and I would be for offering our services elsewhere."

"Yes—of course. Rather so!" Mark agreed with fervour; then checked himself and fell silent.

Keith said nothing; but his thoughts were effectually diverted from the threat of war to a more personal threat that touched him very nearly, because

Mark was Helen's son. Being a man, he understood, as she could never do, the nature of Mark's infatuation for this alluring girl—"the ideal mistress" he classified her mentally; the siren-type, who sits combing her hair in the sunset and smilingly wrecks the souls of men. The straighter and cleaner a man's record, the more easily she flings her gold dust in his eyes; and should she chance to fall in love——

Macnair had not yet made up his mind on that score. He was concerned at the moment with one painful, practical question: could she, in the event of war, conceivably induce Helen's son to play the coward's part? He knew Mark for a man of strong passions; but he believed him equally strong in spirit and in will. He felt troubled and anxious none the less. Had he known of that recent surrender he would have felt more anxious still.

Mark left the study without further allusion to the subject; and later in the morning Bel appeared serenely graceful, in a new yellow silk golf coat and a distractingly becoming hat. With such a vision before his eyes no man in his senses could feel seriously concerned about European thunderclouds that might still, at the eleventh hour, dissolve in a harmless shower of rain.

Bel, of course, was airily convinced they would. "Besides," she concluded, with her engaging air of sagacity, "where's the earthly use of being an island, with an invincible Navy, if we're to be scared by every little flare-up across the Channel?"

Mark smiled and shook his head at her. She was ensconced in the deep window-sill of the studio, lightly swinging one foot.

"It's not a case of being scared, but of being prepared," he said, fingering the stray tendrils in the nape of her neck. "If Germany's engineering this squabble it'll be the biggest flare-up the world's ever seen; and before many days are out we may be thanking Prince Louis on our knees for having kept the Fleet in being——"

"Oh, be quiet!" she commanded, slapping the hand that caressed her. "You're as bad as Mr. Macnair." She leaned half out of the window. "It's a divine morning. A boat on the loch would be more to the purpose than all your horrid battleships put together. Here comes the midday post."

"The *Times!*" cried Mark, and was promptly extinguished.

"You aren't going to look at the *Times* till to-night," she said. "You're to look at me in my new clothes. What else did I put them on for?"

The word "clothes" reminded him of an expected parcel. "You wait there a minute," he said mysteriously; and very soon reappeared with two of them. From the smaller, he extracted a rope of amber beads; from the larger, a snow leopard skin, lined with satin, to form a natural cloak.

Bel's face, during these proceedings, was certainly better worth looking at than the *Times*. The beads were the very colour of her coat; the pale tones and dusky markings of the skin harmonised perfectly with her hair; and her delight in both was too genuine to be marred by minor affectations. By lunch-time Mark had almost forgotten the International Crisis, and the threat of war.

But throughout that unforgettable week—when the world's destiny hung in the balance—events in Europe moved swiftly toward the great upheaval; while in England the tension of anxiety increased daily. Between those who feared that an enlightened Liberal Government would be criminal enough to fight, and those who feared the worse criminality of its failure to stand by France, there could be little peace of mind anywhere, except among the wilfully or constitutionally blind—a large majority in every country.

At Inveraig they could talk of little else, except in snatches. And Mark—reared by his mother to live in touch with the whole vast sweep of life—was as bad as the rest: though Bel, in her leopard-skin cloak and amber beads, was a vision enchanting enough to distract any man's thoughts from graver matters: and indeed she did her utmost to that end with fitful success. In her heart she hated this looming shadow, chiefly because it dwarfed her proudest achievement —the conquest of Mark: and as the week drew on, she became bored; even faintly irritable. She began to find or invent excuses for avoiding meals at Inveraig, and when Mark remonstrated, she candidly owned to being tired of the subject. She wasn't accustomed to that sort of talk, and a little of it went a long way. She would give him a holiday on Friday, she concluded graciously. They had friends coming to join them at The Rowans—Mr. and Miss Maitland from his part of the world.

Mark raised his eyebrows. "Maitland?"

"Yes. He's classical master at High Rough School. D'you know him?"

" 'M—slightly. I've not much use for him. Sort of chap whose veins run ink instead of blood."

She flushed a little and lifted her head. "He's a great friend of mine; so you needn't make rude remarks."

"A *great* friend?"

Mark bent a searching glance upon her.

"Yes: in his lukewarm way."

"Oh, if he's lukewarm, he'll do! Didn't I say his veins ran ink? I'll let you be polite to him on Friday, and I must have Saturday afternoon and evening entire as a reward!"

But even while they talked, Europe hummed with the stir of gathering armies; and by Saturday morning the head-lines announced "Russian Mobilisation Complete." Germany, who had secretly forestalled that event, responded by declaring a state of war, and an impenetrable veil fell between her and the outer world.

Keith handed the paper to Mark, who had come in late for breakfast. "There you are, old boy. I said the end of the month, didn't I? Russia brings in France automatically. It only remains for Italy and England to show their hands. I back Italy to keep hers clean and stay out of it."

"And I back England to fight."

"Yes—if we've still enough of the old leaven to save us from the curse of legal verbiage and inaction."

For the rest of the meal he confined himself to intermittent "rumblings" (the word was Lady Forsyth's) against peace-cranks, Internationals, and so forth; but it was not until he had talked over

the telephone to a friend in Edinburgh that he really let himself go—an event as rare as the proverbial "blue moon."

For it transpired that his friend—a professor of distinction—had just promised his signature to a neutrality letter strongly protesting against England's intervention in a Continental quarrel.

"Continental quarrel, forsooth! And the damned fools, not content with their egregious letter, are moving heaven and earth—that's to say International and Labour lights—to get up a Neutrality Committee, by way of further assisting a divided Government that stands shivering on the brink. Here we are, sunk deep in the ruts of peace in its most repellent form—peace, that has almost landed us in civil war; yet sober-minded men and women cry out against our taking the only course that can conceivably save half Europe, including ourselves, from the domination of the German machine."

His quiet grey eyes had a glint of steel in them, as he stood there beside the telephone in the study, swept, by intensity of conviction, so completely out of his philosophic calm, that Helen and Mark, the natural talkers, never dreamed of interposing a word. On the rare occasions when the spirit of speech moved him, they were willing to listen *ad infinitum*.

He had descended to a lower plane now, and was confounding the tyranny of the week-end habit, the curse of the country, that would send responsible people scuttling out of town on a Friday, though the last trump were sounding in their ears. He also confounded, for the first time in his life, that sacrosanct institution the Scottish Sunday, which would cut them

off from letters, telegrams, and papers for twenty-four hours.

"Never mind, old man, we've got the blessed telephone," Mark consoled him, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "And we can jolly well make ourselves a nuisance to all our friends and relations. What else is a telephone for? I vote we run down to Glasgow on Monday and sleep the night. We'd feel a bit closer to things——"

An imperious tinkle interrupted him. Admiral Sir John Forsyth this time. Unlike the heads of the political world, he had come up post-haste from Dorset, and he wanted a few words with his nephew.

It was while these things were in progress that Bel arrived, eager for a sight of Mark, and found herself relegated to the drawing-room with Sheila and Mona for company. Sheila apologised in her friendliest fashion; but that was quite beside the point. The appearance of the tea-tray brought in Lady Forsyth; but not till tea was half over did the telephone release Mark. Then at last came her chance of escape; and the lovers wandered off through the pine copse on to the small patch of open moor overlooking the loch.

"A shame to keep her waiting," he apologised tenderly. "But this is history, darling, on a tremendous scale; so you must make allowances."

"I'm trying to." She dropped her lips with a bewitching air of martyrdom. "But tremendous things are rather exhausting. I can't get into a state of thrill, like your mother and the rest. And I'm very glad—you may think what you like!—that there really is a chance we shall keep out of it. Mr. Maitland says Sir Edward Grey has admitted that the

Entente's not binding, and a Liberal Government *can't* drag a free people into the horrors of war."

"Damn Maitland!" Mark flashed out; then reddened and drew in his lip. "Sorry. But if you don't want fireworks you'd better keep that chap's inspired remarks to yourself. Besides, you're practically one of us now; and I can't have you talking pacifist twaddle."

"Well, don't let's talk of it at *all*. I'm sick of the whole thing."

Mark said nothing, and they walked on in silence through the heather. Then she turned to him and slipped a hand through his arm. "Darling, let's go off somewhere to-morrow for the whole day and forget all about everything, except each other."

"Bel!" He stood regarding her with an enigmatical smile. For an instant she thought he would consent. "I'd love to, of course," he said honestly. "But I simply couldn't do it. Though we can't get papers, there's the telephone; and my mind would be on the stretch the whole time."

She shrugged, with a faint reflection of his smile. "Very well. I'll join the others. They're going for an outing in any case. Your Scotch Sunday is so desolating."

"Then I'll call in for you after supper, if you're not too tired. Keith and I are going to Glasgow on Monday for the night. See how they're taking things there."

She sighed. "This wretched war is simply spoiling everything." Her shoulder touched his as she spoke, and at once he put his arm round her. "It seems to shut me out."

"Only because you refuse to come in."

"But, Mark—it's such a horror." Her shiver was not pure affectation. "And I've no taste for horrors. I can feel it hovering there, across the Channel, like a tiger waiting to spring. And when I try to forget it, you don't help me. As you *won't* come to-morrow, I shall console myself by asking Mr. Lenox. I like him the best of your lot."

"All right; ask him. He can keep an eye on you. See that you don't flirt with Maitland."

"But I do—always. It's an understood thing between us. And if I can't have you, I must get what fun I can out of him!"

Maurice, though feeling the strain in his own way, accepted Bel's invitation, plus her proviso that no one was to say "War" or "Politics" from start to finish. Privately she felt Mark's defection more keenly than she cared to admit, but she intended to enjoy herself in spite of it; and she succeeded, by the primitive process of playing the two men off against each other. Maitland—a loose-limbed narrowly built person of nondescript colouring—had for years been discreetly in love with her. He was of those for whom discretion is the better part of everything. For which cause a penniless Bel could never become Mrs. Maitland. But the moth persisted in hovering round the candle, and he had heard with a mild pang of her engagement to Sir Mark.

Like many schoolmasters of second-rate quality, Maitland was less a man of intellect than of specialised culture. Years of close touch with the "humanities" had failed to make him human. He was humanitarian, merely: a very different pair of sleeves.

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Maurice, watching him with Miss Alison, saw the girl in a new light, and wondered a little what Forsyth would think about it. But on his return he simply remarked that Maitland seemed the sort of schoolmaster who disseminated ignorance; that Miss Alison had been in great form, and they had had a ripping day.

Early on Monday afternoon the two men set out for Glasgow; and to Lady Forsyth the house, bereft of their presence, seemed a dead thing. A man's woman in the finest sense of the phrase, her men were the first best gifts of God to her. She was their born comrade. She had the rare gift of seeing life with their eyes; and through her nature ran a streak of inconsistency, peculiarly endearing to the more consistent half of creation.

Even in the midst of her real anxiety lest a Government wedded to peace should withhold England from the path of honour and safety, her sensitive spirit revolted against the oncoming holocaust of death and suffering, with a fierce intensity of which Bel's nature was purely incapable. She felt it as a vast thundercloud, stealthily, inexorably blotting out the light of heaven. These days of waiting—days of tense and awful quiet for all who were far from the throbbing heart of things—were as the pause of utter stillness that precedes the crash of the storm. And in that stillness she could see and feel too vividly things that filled her with a shuddering dread. The whole world's sorrow seemed to beat upon her heart, and at intervals through the vast diapason of universal anguish came the piercing note of personal pain.

She knew—triumphantly, yet shiveringly she knew—what it would mean for her if England went into the war, not merely as a protective Power, but as a united Empire to challenge conclusions with her most insidious and most formidable enemy. Mark would go out to France; and he would lose no time in going. That was his way. He had said no word of it, so far, either to her or Bel. But she knew his intention, if the girl did not; and even while she shrank from the surrender of her last best treasure, she never dreamed of withholding him. If it were really to be war on a big scale, everything, everyone must go. . . .

CHAPTER IX

"Thy trumpet lies in the dust . . .
Help me to don my armour!
Let hard blows of trouble strike fire into my life.
Let my heart beat in pain—beating the drum of thy victory.
My hands shall be utterly emptied to take up thy trumpet."

RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

"WAR declared—*at last!*" Keith announced, in his quiet impressive voice; and Lady Forsyth heard the words with an odd mingling of relief and dread.

The next moment she was startled by a stab of almost physical pain near her heart. That it was not physical she knew very well. Instinctively she glanced at Mark, whose eyes were already on her face; and there passed between them a swift, unspoken message that eased the hearts of both.

Breakfast, usually a cheerful meal, was rather a silent affair; and the minute it was over Lady Forsyth slipped away to her turret-room. Sheila was helping Ralph pack, that he might hurry down south and report himself at the India Office. Mark had gone off to the study with Keith; and Lady Forsyth had been sitting in her chair by the window for nearly half an hour before she heard his step outside the door.

She turned, with his name on her lips; but her throat felt constricted, and no sound came.

In response to that mute appeal, he dropped on

one knee beside her and laid his hands in her lap. It was his old boyish trick when he came to confess a delinquency and knew himself forgiven in advance.

"Mother," he said, "we've got to put *every*thing into this, you and I—to the uttermost farthing. All our men must go. And I must give 'em the lead myself."

His voice was steady, and there was a light in his eyes that she had never seen there yet. For all her courage, her own smile was a rather misty affair.

"You're my uttermost farthing," was all she could say.

"Yes. It's bitter hard luck on you. But—you don't grudge my going?"

She shook her head. "The greater my treasures the greater my gift. This widow's mite is a very large mite!" she added, smiling bravely now, and passing her hands slowly over his broad shoulders down to his elbows where they rested.

For answer he looked steadily into her eyes. The faint, yet perceptible barrier raised by his engagement was levelled utterly; the old blessed sense of comradeship restored. Friction between them was purely a surface affair. The moment they touched fundamentals, they were one. And Mark, for his part, was aware of a restfulness in this deeper understanding; a restfulness that he had missed of late without knowing it.

He knew now, very well; and she saw that he knew: but he only said, "I was sure I could count on you. Keith, approves, of course. I rather thought of going down at once with Ralph. You know—it's enlisting I'm after. The quickest way——"

"Oh Mark—*not* that!" Her hands went up in protest; and, for the first time, there was sharp pain in her voice.

"Now be a good Mums and listen without interrupting," he commanded, imprisoning her hands. "We're simply going to have the biggest rush to the colours that the world's ever seen. I'm sure of it. And it's up to us 'aristocratic noodles' to give the sacred working-men, of our sacred democracy, a thumping good lead. That's what I meant about my own fellows. Thought you understood——"

"But, my dear—" she checked herself, half laughing. "Have you done? May I interrupt now?"

"You have interrupted! Always do. Go ahead!"

"Well, this is how *I* feel about it. Scores and scores of our blessed noodles will enlist, for the very reason you've given. The thing will be overdone, and if there's a shortage anywhere, it'll be among the officers. Then the wrong sort of men will get commissions and numbers of the right sort will remain stuck in the ranks: one way of democratising the Army! Horrible idea! I believe, as you very well know, in the true aristocracy of breeding and character, in its duties even more than its privileges; and above all in its innate spirit of leadership, that can be trained but not made. That's why—especially in a war that will exceed all others in horror and intensity—I strongly object to wholesale squandering of officer material, our most precious possession."

"But, mother, I'm *not* an officer," Mark protested, adding with a twinkle: "You're having a jolly long innings, you know!"

"Well, I must speak now. It's my only chance.

And you're officer material, Mark. You'd make a fine one, with a minimum of training. You've got it in you. Will you—for once admit I may be in the right?"

He regarded her quizzically. "I was determined not to, when you started."

"Well, at least consult Keith and Uncle John and Uncle Everard before you do anything drastic! You wouldn't have to wait long for a commission. We've heaps of interest—Frank Gordon and Jim Stuart, not to mention others, would do anything for you in that line. I don't want to be selfish or unpatriotic, but you've admitted it comes hard on me. Why make it needlessly harder?"

To her entire amazement he flung his arms round her and leaned his head against her shoulder.

"You blessed little mother," he said under his breath. "You're as plucky as they're made. Our share in this war shall begin with a private victory for you! And let's hope it may be a good omen!"

Taking her head between his hands he kissed her fervently, and she clung to him without a word.

At last he sighed and stood up, very erect, looking out across the sunlit water to the shadowy hills. Her eyes took the same direction; but the familiar scene was no more than a bright quivering blue of colour. For a moment they both felt oddly shy of each other.

Presently it passed, and Helen looked up at her son. "I can't say what I'm feeling, Mark. But I don't think you'll regret my victory. Besides, there's Bel."

"Yes. Poor Bel," he said in a changed voice. "She hates the whole business. And she'll hate it worse than ever now. But if she plays up as you have,

she'll do!" He glanced at his watch. "She'll be here in a minute. I must go and meet her. Don't stay and brood alone, Mums. Go down and talk to Keith. He wants to rush into Ardmuir this morning and fix up a recruiting show for Friday. Sir Mark Forsyth in the chair! On Saturday I vote we go south. There'll be a thundering lot to do. This food panic's disgraceful. Famine, indeed! As if we hadn't a ship afloat."

She put her hands to her temples. "It makes one's head spin. I'll go soon, dear, but I must have a few minutes alone—to take it all in."

So he left her, and went slowly down-stairs with a preoccupied look in his eyes. It was scarcely the look of a lover eager to meet the beloved after two days' absence; and in truth his natural eagerness was dimmed by a lurking doubt as to how Bel would receive his announcement. The contrast between the utter confidence he had felt in his mother's acquiescence and his curious lack of confidence in the girl he meant to make his wife hurt him horribly. He blamed himself for it, as a matter of course; but deep down, he knew that doubt did not come readily to his nature; that never yet had he doubted where he loved.

From the front door he caught sight of her at the far end of the drive, moving in her graceful, leisurely fashion, head bent, eyes on the ground. She was wearing the yellow silk golf coat and the amber beads, and the distractingly becoming hat; and, of a sudden, Mark realised with a pang, how, in the last few days, the great issues at stake had dwarfed everything—even Bel.

But now that the tension was over, the die cast, her

spell reasserted itself; and a great wave of tenderness flowed through him. It would be hateful having to leave her: but he was so made that the question of choice simply did not enter his head.

Now he hurried forward, convinced that so great an occasion must lift her above herself. It was always the same: at sight of her, doubt grew shamefaced—and fled.

Before he reached her, she looked up and waved with her parasol, and Bobs, suddenly recognising her, bounded forward with eloquent tongue and tail. While she was patting him, Mark came up and quietly slipped a hand through her arm.

"That's good," he said, with a sigh of satisfaction. "Come to our summer-house on the heather and have a talk."

As he led her towards the copse she gave him one of her soft side-long glances, whether of scrutiny or affection it were hard to say.

"Bobs is more demonstrative than his master."

The answering flash of his eye and tongue were direct as his whole nature. "You won't induce me to kiss you in the open drive by your base insinuations!"

And it was not till they reached the depth of the little wood that he came to a standstill; a strange light of exaltation on his face. Then he drew her to him and kissed her with a still intensity of passion, as if he would make her understand the measure of his love before telling her that which, perversely taken, might seem to throw a doubt on it.

When he released her, she stood back a little and smiled on him, rosy from his kiss, hands laid lightly on his breast.

"Are you as glad—as all that, to get her back?" she asked.

"More than all that—heaps more. I agree with Robert Louis. Separation has its good points! But we'll soon be suffering from too sharp a taste of it—scores of us. I suppose you deigned to glance at the head-lines this morning?"

"Yes, of course." She frowned. "It's horrible—beyond belief. Rex says it simply means that, in spite of all our science and progress, the world's not civilised yet."

"More fool he, to imagine it was. Patches of it are half-civilised, that's about all. And enough too. Over-civilisation, goodness knows why, has a queer tendency to rot men's souls. Makes the body too comfortable, perhaps."

"Rubbish! That's one of your fads just because you're against progress."

"Not I, in the right direction. I'm only against the modern craze for rushing wildly round a fixed point and getting nowhere. This war may set the clock back, but I bet it'll get us somewhere before it's done with us."

He was back at the unavoidable subject again; and this time he resolved to have done with shilly-shallying.

They had reached the summer-house fronting moor and loch; and as he stood aside to let her pass in, she said, smiling: "I like the way you barbarians justify your own point of view! Anyway, I suppose you're all satisfied now, and things will be a little more normal?"

"Normal?" His shock of surprise sounded in his

tone. "How *can* they be normal when we've got to fight for our lives against a Power like Germany? Who'd wish them to be? I'm afraid you haven't read much *more* than the head-lines, Bel. There's no end to think of: no end to do. As soon as I've rounded up my fellows here, we must go back home and round 'em up there. I wanted to enlist myself, but mother's persuaded me to apply for a commission. She's splendid about it, and I'm counting on you to be the same."

"Mark!" Her surprise was no less than his own. She sank upon a wooden seat near the window and looked up at him, with eyes that had gone suddenly chill and hard, like bits of blue glass. "Have you *quite* gone off your head?"

Words and tone produced a horrid revulsion of feeling. But he answered her with studied quietness. "I was never saner in my life."

She received that statement with a faint lift of her brows.

"You can stand there and tell me—*me*—you're going to fight in the most awful war there's ever been, as calmly as if you were talking about ordering a new suit, in spite of all I said about Ulster?"

"Ulster! Good Lord, you're not building on *that?*" he cried, enlightened at last. "My darling girl, can't you see for yourself that there's no shadow of comparison? That was a matter of personal choice. Something I could give up for your sake—and I did."

"Well, if you really—care, you ought to give up this too. It's not fair on me, or your mother. Fighting is the soldiers' business. Leave it to them."

"A few hundred thousand against millions—eh?"

"That's the Government's fault. Besides, we've plenty of Territorials and things."

His short laugh sounded more impatient than amused.

"A lot you know about Territorials and things! They're thousands below strength. And anyway, Bel, it's not a question of Territorials—or of caring. It's a plain matter of duty."

"Well, you've money and brains. You could do quite good work in lots of other ways."

"And round up better chaps than myself to go out and fight for me? No, thank you! There'll be too many ready to take shelter behind that plausible excuse. If they feel they can do so honestly, let them. Anything I could do at home could be equally well done by mother and Keith. Did you happen to notice the 'Call to Arms'? Do words like *that* leave you unmoved?"

"N-no. But it means common men, not men with big responsibilities like you."

"Bel, that's pure quibbling. It says 'All,' and it means 'All.' Could any man, I ask you, with a shred of conscience or love for his country, read that and remain at home rotting round with recruits and committees? I couldn't, that's flat. This war is either a crusade or a meaningless horror. And for me—it's a crusade. I'm not talking hot air. There's too much of that in the papers already. I'm only trying to make you see that I've no choice. I can't stand outside—even for you."

"That simply means you won't," she said very low. He sighed and stood silent, baffled, yet unshaken, looking out over the sun-splashed heather. Then it

occurred to him that, being a woman, persuasion might move her though argument failed.

He sank on one knee and put his arm round her. "Darling," he urged, "I can't bear hurting you like this. War *is* cruelly hard on the women: but you only make things worse for us both if you let it come between us."

He felt her stiffen under his hand. "It has come between us utterly," she said. "All this week it's been getting worse. If you talk till all's blue, I shall never see this—with your eyes. So it just amounts to this. You must either give up your quixotic notion of patriotism, or . . . you must give up . . . me."

She spoke with more than her usual deliberation. The words seemed to drop out clear and hard as pebbles.

"Bel! You don't mean that!" he cried, hurt to the quick. "It would simply break my heart."

His sincerity was so plain, that her own heart thrilled in response. She slipped a hand round his head. Her fingers drifted with a slow caressing movement over his hair; and her voice took its most seductive tone.

"Mark, darling, if that's true, keep me—keep me. I'm yours, if only . . . you'll stay out of the fighting!"

Instantly he released her and sprang to his feet—angry, miserable, desperate. Yet still, in his very desperation, he argued, pleaded, and exhorted her afresh: without result. He had struck the layer of adamant beneath her skin-deep tenderness. She could not, or would not, see things in their true pro-

CHAPTER X

Vanish every idle thought,
Perish, last of Folly's ways!
All that pride of eye hath sought,
All that rebel flesh hath wrought,
Utterly reduced to naught,
How can ye outlive these days?

X.

THAT was how his mother found him when she came in search of him. The lunch-gong had brought no Mark; and no one had seen him, except Maurice, who, from his window, had caught sight of the lovers entering the wood. All the morning she had been secretly anxious. Now she felt certain something was wrong, and telling the others not to wait, she fled out to his favourite haunt, hardly knowing what she expected to find.

He did not hear her till she set foot in the summer-house; and the wild idea smote him—Could it be Bel?

With a start he looked up; and at sight of his face Lady Forsyth's heart stood still.

"My darling Boy, what *has* happened?"

Mark frowned and straightened his shoulders. "She's chucked me—that's all," he said in a dazed voice. "They've poisoned her point of view between them." His eyes challenged hers. "Mother, you've

been right all along. I suppose—you even foresaw—this!"

"Dear, indeed I didn't." Her hand closed on the rough woodwork. She so longed to gather him to her heart. "I was anxious—a little. But I hoped better things of her."

"So did I. We were a pair of fools, it seems. And there's an end of *that*." With a gesture he dismissed the subject, and added, almost in his normal voice, "What about the meeting? Any luck?"

"Yes. People are quite keen. But—you'll hardly feel like speaking."

"Oh, I'll speak all right. The King's affairs come a long way first. I've had enough of false perspectives this morning. I'll probably speak all the better for having—flung in everything." He sighed. "Give me to-morrow, Mums, to pull myself together, and I'll do any mortal thing that's required of me. But I can't show up yet—you understand? And it's you that must do the telling—as before!"

A spasm of pain crossed his face and she passed a hand over his hair.

He drew back sharply. "Oh—not that," he murmured; then checked himself and tried to smile. "Sorry. I'm feeling—all raw, Mother. I can't be civil even to you." He could not tell her why the feel of a woman's hand on his hair was unendurable, and would be, for some time to come.

"I understand, dear," she said, and turned to go. "Shall I send anything to the studio?"

He shook his head. "Later on, perhaps. Dinner time. You might come up yourself."

"Of course I will."

And so she left him.

Lunch was nearly over when she got back. They had kept some hot for her; but she hardly touched it.

Briefly, without comment, she told them her news: and escaped with Keith into the study. To him she could speak more freely. He loved Mark like a brother; a good deal more, indeed, than the average brother: and she knew—though neither had spoken of it—that he had shared her distrust of Bel.

But her thoughts and her words were of Mark only as she stood beside the man who so intimately shared their lives, her small hand clenched upon the edge of the high mantelshelf; tears in her eyes; but none in her voice.

"He faces trouble so exactly like his father," she said, when she had told him of Mark's refusal to postpone the meeting. "But Richard's phlegm went deeper. Mark, underneath, has all my terrible sensibility; though he won't let me see it except accidentally."

Keith said nothing. He was not given to superfluous comment; and on the whole she found his silences more satisfactory than other people's talk. He knew she was more or less thinking aloud. She was not even looking at him, but at a full-length photograph of her husband—a powerful figure of a man.

"It's so strange," she went on in the same subdued tone. "I sometimes see Richard's very self looking at me out of Mark's eyes. When the look comes I seem actually to feel him there. Twice this morning I've seen it. Once when Mark spoke of war and again when he spoke of—that wretched girl. Oh Keith—I hate her!"

The low voice broke unmistakably; and she bowed her forehead on the back of her hand.

Macnair stood looking at her, his keen eyes clouded with tenderness. A moment he seemed to hesitate, then deliberately, he laid his hand on her shoulder. "Helen, don't break your heart over it," he said. "We men pull through these things: and Mark is made of sterner stuff, if I know him, than to let a girl like Miss Alison smash him up for good. More likely to do that by marrying him than by leaving him. There's a crumb of consolation for you!"

She raised her head now and smiled at him through tears that were not allowed to fall.

"If there is such a crumb anywhere, trust you to find it! What a blessing you are to us, Keith!" As his hand slipped from her shoulder she caught and held it a minute. Then her thoughts went back to her son. "I wonder—will he ever have eyes for Sheila again, after this?"

"More likely after this than before. Sheila's a born mother-woman, a little Sister of Compassion. And we men are such fools, that we're very apt to overlook the beauty of that type till we've suffered a few hard knocks from the other sort. The revulsion from that type, when it comes, is curiously complete. But it takes time. As for our Sheila, whether she would have him, after this, is another matter."

Helen sighed. "I can't forgive Maurice yet," she said. "I wonder if he'll enlist?" And their talk slid back to the one all-absorbing subject—the War.

As for Mark, he spent that interminable afternoon tramping endlessly, aimlessly over the hills; hoping

by the mechanical motion to deaden thought and ease the pain within. Where all memory was intolerable, it hurt him most to recall how cruelly she had tempted him by tone and touch; as it were bribing him to be false to his own convictions. The whole thing bewildered almost as much as it hurt him. There were moments when he came near to hating her; proof, though he did not realise it, that the love she evoked was strongly tinctured with baser metal.

And all the while Bobs, the incurably faithful, trotted to heel or gambolled coquettishly under his master's eyes without eliciting a word or caress.

Hunger and lengthening shadows drew him back at last to the home he loved yet now acutely desired to avoid. She had poisoned even that. Yet how his heart ached for her! How the unregenerate blood in his veins craved the touch of her lips and hands.

He reached his study without encountering anything more human than a stray housemaid; and there the first thing he lighted on was his own tender and beautiful little Study of Contemplation. Standing just inside the door, he feasted his eyes on the soft, still face, the small head with its close-fitting cap of hair and the long-limbed grace of her figure. Then rage flamed in him. He felt like smashing the thing with a hammer and flinging away the pieces as he had flung away her ring. A mere pulse-beat of hesitation saved him and the artist prevailed over the man. He could not murder the work of his hands. Later on, he would give it to Maurice to wean him from the sin of impressionism. Meanwhile, he lifted it as tenderly as he would have touched the original, put it away in a corner cupboard and turned the key.

He had scarcely done so when he heard his mother outside.

"Open the door, dear," she said. "My hands are full."

He opened it and relieved her of a tray set out with appetising food and wine.

"Stunning of you, Mums," he said. "I'm hungry."

To her delight he ate everything and drank three glasses of wine, while they discussed ways and means; the money they could realise, the men they could raise for England in this most critical hour of her destiny. Except for the absence of laughter and badinage in their talk, it was as if nothing abnormal had happened. But Lady Forsyth did not fail to note the disappearance of his terra-cotta treasure; and she was sinful enough to hope it had been destroyed.

She stayed more than half an hour and left him with a fervent "God bless you!" But this time she attempted no caress. She understood.

Next morning, after breakfast, she lingered in her turret-room, wondering what he would do with himself, hoping he would come and let her know. He did come; and her heart ached at the tired look in his eyes.

"I'm going to take the *Watersprite* up the loch, Mums," he told her. "And I'll be away all day. Grant has stocked her well, so I shan't starve. Don't be an idiot if I'm late and go imagining I've drowned myself. At a time like this, a man's life is not his own to chuck away. Besides, I'm not the sort. And—there happens to be you," he added with a travesty of a smile. "On the whole I'd sooner have the honour of being shot by the Germans——"

"Mark—don't!" She drew in a sharp breath.

"Sorry, Mums. But it's true. By the way, as I'm wasting some valuable time hadn't we better stay over Sunday?"

"That *would* make things easier," she admitted. "But I thought—you'd rather get away soon."

"My dear Mother, don't fash yourself with fancies. If it'll ease things, we'll jolly well stay. *I* don't care a damn."

The spark of irritation was purely refreshing: and he never apologised to her for "language" accidental or otherwise. So complete was the comrade spirit between them that he prided himself on his habit of speaking to her straightly as man to man. More than once, in University days, he had filled some prospective visitor with envy by the casual remark: "Don't be alarmed if you hear me scrapping with my mother. She's the right sort. I can talk to her just exactly as I talk to you."

Now, in answer to his outburst, she said quietly: "Very well, Monday. I'll tell the others."

"That's all right. And don't you be a fool about me!"

So he left her and she did her best to obey him; but the faint consolation that his trouble brought him nearer to herself was obliterated by her acute consciousness of his hidden pain and resentment against the cause of it.

That grey, weary Thursday seemed as if it would never pass. Clouds had rolled up out of the west. Scudding showers lashed the loch; and through them she could picture Mark driving the little steam-yacht he loved. Long after sunset he came back wet

to the skin; but looking, on the whole, more like himself. He had fought and conquered something out there in the rain and wind. But he spent what remained of the evening in his studio as before.

On Friday evening, when they were gathered in the square hall waiting to start, he strode casually downstairs and nodded his greetings as if he had merely been away for a couple of nights. He had prepared a speech, he said, that ought to make the men of Ardmuir sit up to some purpose: and Keith, watching the little incident from the study threshold, murmured: "Well done, old boy!"

A second car had been ordered to accommodate the party; and while they made ready, Mark was left momentarily alone with Sheila in the hall.

Then she took courage and looked up at him.

"Mark—I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I may say that much, mayn't I?"

For a second he held her gaze. Then: "You may say anything you please," he answered, "when you look like that! Truth is," he paused, "she's never been taught to see things the right way. It was just—that one couldn't make her understand."

"Poor Bel! She must be very unhappy."

"Bel—unhappy!" His astonishment was manifest. But then—Sheila had not seen the look in her eyes. "I doubt it," he added with a touch of bitterness.

"*I* don't," the soft voice persisted. "She's bound to be—if she cares."

"But if she cared, how *could* she——?"

The note of pain in his voice gave her still more courage.

"You said—she didn't understand, and that poisons everything."

Touched to the heart he said impulsively, "Sheila, what a wise little Mouse you are!"

It was his old nickname for her and she drew in a quick breath. "Not so very! But I do know—about caring."

"The first best knowledge surely," he said: then Keith appeared and bade them hurry up.

But her eyes, shining on him through tears, and her words that gave him a new point of view lingered in his memory. Odd how readily he could speak of Bel to Sheila, how hardly to his mother, with whom he could talk of everything in earth or heaven. And surely no one but Sheila could have been inspired to couple sympathy for himself with so tender and delicate a plea for Bel. If she were right, if Bel were really suffering, the door of hope might still be ajar. Meantime there was his speech; for which he had made comprehensive notes; there were convictions and appeals that he must drive home to the hearts of his hearers; and while he sat smoking in silence beside Keith—who drove the car—words full of vigour and fire came crowding into his brain——

When at length he stood on the platform waiting for his clamorous welcome to subside, the flame of his conviction burnt away all nervousness, all dread of failure; and for half an hour he spoke as none had imagined he could speak, himself least of all.

"First rate," Keith said quietly as he sat down amid a storm of cheers.

"Heaven knows how I did it!" he answered under cover of the noise. "Wish I could bolt now."

But the Provost had risen and was praising him to his face; a far worse ordeal than the one he had so triumphantly weathered. The recruiting result, in figures, was not sensational: but Ardmuir was obviously impressed. It begged leave to distribute Sir Mark's "great recruiting speech" as a leaflet; and Sir Mark, privately overwhelmed, gave gracious consent, with the air of one who made brilliant speeches as easily as he ate his breakfast.

"Really, old boy, you ought to stand for Parliament," Keith said as they drove home. "If that speech of yours is well distributed, the men will soon be tumbling in. One has to give them time up here. The Radical spirit is so strong in our beloved country."

"And the beauty of it is that the bulk of 'em, if they only knew it, remain Radicals just *because* they're so conservative!" Mark retorted with a flash of his mother's humour. "But Parliament—no thanks; not yet awhile."

Saturday was given over to rounding up his own men and business connected with his mother's small estate. That evening he conquered, not without difficulty, a temptation to stroll down into the village and discover whether The Rowans was yet empty of its treasure; and when the last post came in he knew.

Glancing through half a dozen envelopes, he came suddenly on Bel's handwriting. His mother, who was watching him, saw, without appearing to see, that he pocketed all his letters unopened and, after a reasonable interval, rose and left the room. It was easy to guess what had happened; and she rated herself for the horrid sinking at her heart. She could not sleep till she knew: but as Mark did not reappear,

she went up early and, in passing, knocked at his door.

"Good night, dear," she said.

He opened it and stood before her—transfigured.

"Come along in, Mums." Drawing her forward he closed the door behind her. "Read that!"

He thrust a faintly scented sheet of note-paper into her hand, and she obeyed.

Bel's communication was brief, moving, and very much to the point.

"Are you generous enough to forgive me—and come to me?" she wrote without preamble. "If you can keep it up—*I can't.* I saw and heard you at Ardmuir. You are *brave.* As for me, I'm bitterly sorry and ashamed. I hate it all still. But if you wish it, I am yours—unconditionally, BEL. I shall be alone here after 10.30. I can't face Inveraig."

Lady Forsyth had to read that note more than once before she could feel sure of her voice. To her it seemed studied, consciously written for effect: and the writing itself was equally studied, with the same touch of hardness in it that showed in the level line of eyelids and brows.

"Well?" Mark was growing impatient.

"You *can* forgive her?" she asked, looking steadily up at him.

"Of course I can. And you must too. She's sorry. She—cares. Isn't that enough for any one?"

"But she's not convinced."

"*I'll* convince her, in time. I hope she'll come south with us to-morrow."

Lady Forsyth drew in her lips and at once his hands came down on her shoulders.

"Look here, Mums, I *won't* have you antagonising and doubting her any more—after this. It spoils everything. You might make an effort if only for my sake. It's beyond belief getting her back; and your attitude's the only flaw in my happiness. Has been all along."

She was silent a minute, then she put her two hands on his breast. "Dear, I will make an effort for your sake. I refuse to be the flaw in your happiness! It's a degrading position for a mother."

He stooped and kissed her for the first time since Wednesday morning. "Bless you!" he said. "Good night."

Alone in her room, confronting this new, unwelcome development, she realised how, through all the pain of his grief, she had been upheld by the secret conviction that his loss was gain; some day he would know it. Now the old miserable uncertainty was nagging at her afresh. In her heart, she distrusted the sincerity of the whole incident. But she had given her word to Mark, and Bel should have the benefit of all the doubts in creation.

Mark's watch was three minutes short of the half-hour when he stood outside the square grey house perched on the hillside above the road. A white curtain fluttered; and a glimpse of Bel's face signified that the coast was clear.

When he entered the homely sitting-room and closed the door she did not run to meet him as a simpler woman would have done. She remained standing

near the mantelpiece on the farther side of the square table, smiling her cool provocative smile.

"Mark!" she said softly. "I've been wondering and wondering would you really come?"

By that time the square table was no longer between them and Mark was holding her as if he could never let her go.

"Would you have broken your heart, if I hadn't?" he asked at last.

"Very nearly!" she admitted, with the slowest possible lift of her lashes.

"But, Bel—if you cared, how *could* you pull it through? How could you look at me with your eyes like bits of glass?"

"You forget," she said, "I can act. It was because—I cared so much; because I couldn't bear the idea of your taking part in that horror out there; and because you were so obstinate, that in the end I put on the strongest screw I could think of—and it wasn't so strong as I supposed. That's the inner history of the last three days."

He regarded her searchingly, taking it all in. "Women are queer things," he said. "Did you really suppose I'd capitulate—under the screw?"

"I half hoped so—till I heard your speech. Then I began to see that I'd never known the real Mark: only Bel's lover."

"And—did you approve of the real Mark?"

She laughed and kissed him.

"Honestly, I found him rather alarming. Too big altogether for a mere Bel. But I wanted him more than ever. And now I know he's still mine, I can't let him go!"

For Mark there was only one flaw in those first raptures of reunion: and for that flaw his mother was unwittingly responsible. Nothing would induce Bel to come up to Inveraig or to travel south with the Forsyths on Monday.

"I can't face them yet awhile," she persisted, "specially your Mother. She won't easily forgive me for hurting you so. No real mother could. Besides, she was probably thanking her stars for your escape; and now I've turned up again, like a bad penny!"

"Bel!"

But she laid her hand upon his lips.

"Hush and listen to me. It wouldn't be fair on Harry either; stranding her with those two. In ten days, we can both come south and a regenerate Bel can dare to pay you a visit. Their minds will be full of such big terrible things by then that they'll take me for granted. As for you—the real Mark will be so swamped with his responsibilities that there would be no time for love-making, even if I came."

In the end he was forced to admit that she was right. Three days of fighting himself had not been without a steadying effect on his impatient spirit: and so the matter was settled.

Rain and wind had ceased. They spent all the afternoon and evening together on the water; and on Monday the Forsyth party travelled down to Wynchcombe Friars.

At no time could Lady Forsyth leave Inveraig without a pang: and never had it been sharper than on that 10th of August with the glory and anguish of Belgium's gallant stand beating on her brain,

and the poignant question at her heart—when, and in what circumstances, would they four see that grey rugged house and the lochs and hills of Scotland again?

BOOK II

THE UTTER PRICE

CHAPTER I

In my heart there burns a flame;
But no smoke shows;
And no one knows.

Japanese Song.

WYNCHCOMBE FRIARS was a singularly perfect relic of the Tudor period. It rambled, it blossomed into irrelevant gables, it took you to its heart. The lordly spaciousness of an eighteenth-century mansion seemed dull and featureless, by contrast with its individuality, its friendly charm. And of all its beautiful old rooms was none more individual than Mark's studio, with its oak-pannelled walls, deep window-seats and leaded casements that opened upon the sea of pine tops he had described to Bel. For him and his mother, it was the soul of the house; and in nothing was their intimacy more evident than in the fact that this, his holy of holies, was hers also. A certain square bay-window that caught the last of the sun upon the pines held her armchair of dull blue brocade, her book-case and elbow table. Blue prevailed also in the window-seats, the casement curtains and the Turkish rugs on the polished floor.

The studio itself contained little beyond Mark's paraphernalia, his writing-table and a few pieces of priceless old furniture. The spirit of Michael Angelo pervaded the place:—models of his statues and groups,

sepia studies by Mark from the great friezes; and a portrait of the Florentine's rugged head occupied the place of honour above the mantelpiece. The blue-tiled fireplace beneath was flanked by Mark's first two essays in statuary: symbolic figures of Triumph and Defeat. Triumph, a splendid nude, stood poised upon a rock; arms uplifted, head flung back. Defeat, a fallen Lucifer, still sullenly defiant, leaned upon his battered sword; a figure of sombre strength. The Viking, who accompanied Mark on his moves, was set in a dark oak niche that served for frame and threw him into strong relief.

Still, beneath all the beauty and friendliness of the room, there lurked the same unobtrusively ascetic note that had been more marked in the simpler studio at Inveraig.

So at least thought Maurice Lenox, who lounged smoking in an armchair, wondering, secretly, how Mark could bring himself to leave it all, patriotism or no. He, personally, had found it quite enough of a wrench to shut up his modest rooms in Chelsea—till when? God, or the devil, alone could tell.

He had gone straight from Inveraig to his home in Surrey, wondering what possible use there could be for such as he in this terrible *galère*:—he, who had small knowledge of firearms and so heartily detested taking life that he could not even find pleasure in fishing. Mark had suggested enlisting in the Artists' Rifles: a suggestion since confirmed by Sir Eldred Lenox, with a blunt admonition to look sharp about it. Sir Nevil Sinclair, of Bramleigh Beeches, commanded them. He would send the boy's name up for a commission the moment he was reasonably fit for it: and

on the whole Maurice found it a relief to have the question of choice taken out of his hands. He had stipulated for a few days of his promised visit to Wynchcombe Friars, before taking the plunge; and those few days—with Macnair for the only other guest had laid the foundation of a genuine friendship with Forsyth, whose finer qualities shone out notably in this hour of crisis.

Whereas at Inveraig he had at times seemed selfish and a trifle dictatorial, here, as responsible landowner, his mastery and force of character showed in a new light. And as for selfishness—his whole mind seemed set upon the welfare of his people and his place in the coming time of stress. Now, at the very moment when he was most needed, and most longed to be on the spot, he was cheerfully and actively engaged in transferring the reins of government into other hands. To Maurice—a man of random moods and many points of view—such strength and singleness of purpose seemed enviable as it was admirable; and the fact that Forsyth had remained unshaken even by Miss Alison's defection had made a deep impression on the lighter nature of his friend. Since then, he had learnt a good deal more, not only of Sir Mark in a fresh manifestation, but of England's greatest asset—sadly misprized in a democratic age—the hereditary lords of the land.

To-day his brief respite was over.

At the moment, he and Mark had effected their escape from the infliction of war-talk, as perpetrated by Mrs. Melrose and the Vicar's wife, at the tea-table on the terrace. Sir Mark's sudden engagement, by the way, had been a severe shock to Mrs. Melrose,

who suspected that Sheila must have played her cards remarkably ill. But that, after all, was how one might expect her to play cards of any worldly value. She was her Melrose grandmother all over. Not a drop of Burlton blood in her veins. But the war had dwarfed that personal disappointment: and the good lady was brimming with benevolent schemes for herself and the whole neighbourhood.

Meantime the Vicar's wife held the field. Having come in quest of a subscription, she had stayed to murmur decorous and very premature lamentations over the undesirable features of billeting and of the Territorial camps: the sort of thing that reduced Lady Forsyth to speechless exasperation. Mark, divided between sympathy and amusement, had watched her holding herself in, till the assertive voice of Mrs. Melrose created a diversion and dubious murmurs were drowned in a flood of propositions for the local housing of Belgians and the conversion of Wendover Court into a luxurious hospital for officers.

"*You*, Lady Forsyth, with this heavenly place, ought to specialise on convalescents or nerve-cases" —Mrs. Melrose dearly loved making other people's plans—"If we all take a *distinctive* line, there'll be no muddle or overlapping. And of course *dear* little Lady Sinclair will devote herself to the Indians—when they come."

Privately Helen reflected that if her neighbours continued so to afflict her, the first nerve-case for Wynchcombe Friars would be its own mistress.

It was at this point that Mark had given up waiting for the Sinclairs. Not even the presence of Sheila —who had come over with her mother and was staying

on to discuss "War plans"—could detain him, once Mrs. Melrose held the field. Basely deserting Lady Forsyth he left word that Sir Nevil, if he should turn up, would be very welcome in the studio.

Now, while Maurice lounged and reflected, he sat at his littered writing-table, a pipe between his teeth, two deep furrows in his forehead. Beyond that littered table the room held no other signs of work. Easel and modelling pedestal stood empty. A woeful tidiness prevailed, and Mark himself looked older, Maurice thought. Small wonder, seeing all that he must forgo at a stroke when his name appeared in the *Gazette*.

So, throughout Great Britain, in the same casual unemotional fashion, men of every grade were making the supreme sacrifice, cheerfully putting behind them all that made life worth living—possessions, talents, hardly earned distinction, cherished hopes and still more cherished homes. No doubt many of them, like Maurice, privately rebelled; but they, too, were carried forward by the infection of brave example, if by no higher motive. In Mark's company, Maurice had felt that infection strongly: but on this his last evening of freedom the artist in him raged afresh against the hideousness and waste and cruelty of modern war.

For ten minutes Mark had been smoking steadily and silently. He had a difficult letter on his mind. Maurice, who had the horrors of Tirlemont on his nerves, felt suddenly impelled to more candid speech than he had hitherto indulged in, lest he be misjudged.

"I don't know what your private feelings are, Forsyth," he plunged boldly; and Mark started as if

he had been waked from a dream. "But the more I look at this business of enlisting and going out to slaughter Germans—not to mention the chance of their returning the compliment—the more heartily I hate the whole thing. It's nothing so simple as mere funk. And it's not that I'm shirking—you understand."

"Oh, yes. I understand," Mark rejoined, setting his teeth on the stem of his pipe.

But he did not seem disposed to enlarge on his understanding of his private feelings; and Maurice, whose mixed emotions were clamouring for expression, went on: "Mere funk would at least give one something to tackle and overcome. It's this cursed inferno going on inside one's head that does the damage. And the beastly thing seems quite independent of one's thoughts or attention. Just keeps on automatically at the back of my brain. Even when I'm reading or talking, I can hear those infernal guns and shells. I can see the mangled fragments that once were men—the wounds—the blood—the slopes of the Liége forts——"

"Damn you! Shut *up!*" Mark leaned forward suddenly, a spark of anger in his eyes. "D'you suppose you're the only one that's plagued with an imagination?"

Maurice sighed.

"Sorry, old chap," he said, disappointed, but contrite. "It's a relief all the same. And I thought —you understood——"

"Of course I do: a long sight too well." Mark's tone was gentler now. "If it's relief you're after, you'll get that most effectively by going out yourself;

seeing things with your actual eyes: doing things with your actual hands that'll give you no time for cinematographs in your head. You can thank your stars you're a *man*. It's the women given that way who'll have the devil's own time of it. My mother's one, worse luck; and it'll come hard on her—when I'm gone."

Maurice ventured no comment on a subject so poignantly intimate as Lady Forsyth's anxiety for her one remaining son; nor did Mark seem to expect any. He took a few pulls at his pipe, then reverted to generalities.

"Don't write me down an unfeeling brute, Maurice," he said with his friendly smile. "War's the roughest game on earth and we've got to be a bit rough with ourselves if we're to play it to any purpose. I'm horribly well aware that the 'sorrowful great gift of imagination' is the very deuce on these occasions. A shade less of it in us, who have to do the killing, and a shade more of it in our Westminster Olympians —who have to do the foreseeing and forestalling— would be a pleasanter business for ourselves and a better look-out for the country. They're an agile crew with their tongues; and if words were bullets, we might be in Berlin the week after next! Personally, I'd like to see most of 'em scrapped 'for the duration of the war.' Kitchener paramount, with a picked Council, would pull us through in half the time. But that's not my business nor yours. It's for us to play up all we can; thank God for one real Man, and not waste our precious energies in grumbling. There's a sermon for you. And you brought it on yourself!"

Maurice rose, flung away his cigarette end, and strolled down the length of the room and back.

"It's done me a power of good being here," he said, coming to a standstill by the mantelpiece and contemplating Mark's "Triumph." "You're a man as well as an artist, Forsyth; and the bulk of us are not; I, personally, am cursed with too much of Uncle Michael in my composition."

Mark laughed.

"Confound your Uncle Michael! You run along and enlist and kill every German you can lay hands to and your composition will take care of itself. A wee bit stiffening's all you want; and a wee bit taste of red-hot reality will put some backbone into your studio-bred art, that ennobles nothing and nobody and doesn't even want to make itself understood. It's just on the cards that this war—when we're through with it—may give us an altogether saner and more robust revival of art that will spring naturally from a more robust conception of life: an art that will genuinely reflect the spirit of the age, as Michael Angelo reflects the Renaissance. Our present age of machinery and money-getting has precious little spirit to reflect. No collective convictions. Practically no faith, except in success. Consequently life has no vital use for art: and we're ousted by the cinematograph. A few, like myself and Sinclair, still hang on to beauty and the classics. The rest, like the bulk of your advanced friends, say 'Ugliness, be thou my beauty' and proceed to make a little hell of their own in the Grafton Galleries! Just at present, Maurice, the mere artist is the most superfluous creature on God's earth. . . ."

He suddenly laughed and checked himself. "Off on my hobby-horse again! Why the deuce don't you chuck a book at me, old chap? Too much spouting at these recruiting shows will make me an infliction to my friends. Ah—there goes Mrs. Melrose! Joy for Mother! Likewise the devout Mrs. Clutterbuck, who thinks to advertise her own virtue by maligning better folk than herself. Come on down. We'll get the tail-end of tea and the poor dears will need cheering up."

They found the poor dears in very fair spirits—considering. Helen was delighted at recapturing Sheila; and the girl herself made no secret of her distaste for the restless superficial activities of her own home. A telegram from Sir Nevil Sinclair explained his non-appearance and begged Mark not to fail him at the Bramleigh meeting next day. Then, tea being removed and the others dispersed, Mark found himself alone with Sheila, whom he had scarcely seen since the day of Bel's regeneration.

"It's good to get you back again, Mouse," he said, with brotherly directness: and as she merely smiled without looking up, he allowed his eyes to linger on her face. "But I'm not sure I approve of the massage plan, specially if it means careering off to France with Miss Videlle."

Sheila hesitated. "I thought—if you married—there might be Bel. But if Mums really needs me, I'd leave anything, anyone . . . for her. She knows that." The girl's voice throbbed with feeling and a faint colour showed in her cheeks. "I'm very doubtful, though, whether she could or would stay here long—without you."

Mark started and frowned.

"She must! She'll be safe here; and there's no end of useful work for her on the spot. All the same —" he paused, looking deep into the heart of the wood, at pine stems rosy with shafts of light. "I believe you know best. She won't stop. She'd break her heart. War comes cruel hard on the women."

Sheila said nothing: but the set of her lips showed a faint line of strain that he had not noticed before. "Come for a quarter-deck prowl with me, Mouse," he said.

They paced the wide-flagged terrace, veined with moss, till near dinner-time; and only at the last did Mark speak the thought uppermost in his mind. They had reached the far end when he came to a standstill and faced her squarely.

"Sheila—it goes against the grain asking favours for Bel, even of you and Mother; but you were such a brick before; and now—it's a bit of an ordeal for her facing you all after—what happened up there. Otherwise she'd have been here sooner. Of course I'll make her speak to Mums straight away, which may clear the air, between them. But I want you all to be ever so kind and not let her feel a shadow of awkwardness. Just pick up the threads again as if nothing had happened. Will you—for my sake?"

Sheila was leaning now against the balustrade, her hands pressed palm downwards on the stone work.

"Yes, Mark," she said in an odd, contained voice, "I'll do anything I can for your sake. But in my heart—" she suddenly looked up at him with her clear honest eyes, "I can't forgive her—*ever!*"

"*You?*" His surprise brought the blood to her

cheeks. "But when it happened you were so—understanding. It was you who took the edge off my bitterness."

"Because then—I didn't understand," Sheila explained with difficulty. "I thought she had really lost you through her own blindness; and—I was sorry for her. But afterwards, one couldn't help suspecting it was all . . . that perhaps she was simply . . . putting on the screw."

"She admitted as much," he said, looking away across the rose garden.

"Mark! How *could* she?" Her low tone vibrated like a smitten harp-string.

"That's the mystery to a masculine brain. It hurt—considerably. But it seems women do these things."

Sheila checked a natural impulse to repudiate the sweeping assertion. She saw him deliberately erecting a screen for Bel, at the expense of others; but she had already been candid enough, and she would not permit herself to insinuate disparagement.

Her enigmatical silence urged Mark to add: "Bel's had her share of unhappiness, anyhow. She didn't enjoy those three days much more than I did and she's lost more than a week down here. So just be good to her, you deceptive little bit of adamant—and bless you from my heart."

"That's bribery!" Sheila said laughing, and straightening her shoulders. "I don't take payment for my services. But it's time to go and dress for dinner!"

As they strolled back to the house she caught herself reflecting quite philosophically on the impunity with which the Bels of this world may steal horses,

while their less privileged sisters dare not cast a glance over the hedge.

But in spite of her excuse about dressing for dinner, she seemed in no such hurry after all. A sudden longing came over her to see the studio, to sit alone for a few minutes in that shrine of blessed memories: and, having seen Mark safely vanish into his bedroom, she made bold to venture in.

Sinking into Lady Forsyth's armchair, she let the crowding memories sweep through her brain, while her eyes ranged from picture to picture, from statue to statue, as it were learning them by heart, because in future the right of entry she so prized would belong to another. For her, Mark and his art were one and indivisible; and, by an unerring instinct, she dreaded the effect of Bel's demoralising influence on both.

Dearly she loved the virile figure of Triumph; more dearly still, the Viking. Him, she saw and felt as Mark had hoped that Bel might see and feel him. She had been at Wynchcombe Friars during those wonderful days when he came to life under Mark's hands; and in her private heart he stood for the symbol of his creator's unquenchable spirit.

In all these children of his hand and brain, she found the quintessence of the man, and it was her instinct to seek the essence of things.

Mark himself, without and within, was all that she would have a man be—she, who seemed fated to attract only the "poor things" of earth. Since Ailsa's death and his return from Europe, she had worshipped him, with the still intensity of her Northern nature. So felicitous had been their relation, and she so young, so happy in a home atmosphere the very antithesis

of her own, that no afterthought had troubled her unclouded content.

For this reason, she had been able to accept, loyally, uncritically, his sudden and bewildering infatuation for a girl obviously unworthy of him; an infatuation that could survive even his knowledge of the motive which had promoted Bel to such unsparing use of her power. Entirely one with him in spirit, she could not choose but will what he willed: and conviction that Bel honestly loved him had mitigated the pain of her own hidden disappointment in him.

But now even that faint consolation was gone: and here, where associations were more intimate than at Inveraig, the shock to her belief in him seemed infinitely harder to bear. Here the question forced itself upon her—how *could* he, being what he was?

And his fresh appeal on behalf of Bel had badly shaken her innate capacity for acceptance.

Because of that appeal—which would also be made to the others—this girl, who had so cruelly tormented him for her own ends, must not be allowed to suffer a twinge of the discomfort she so richly deserved. For the first time, Sheila was goaded almost to the point of rebellion. For the first time her will was at odds with his: and it hurt more than she chose to admit. From a child she had invented her own private code of courage that never allowed her to say, "I can't bear it." And she would not say it now.

She would do what he asked, under protest, because he asked it. Her attitude, she was convinced, would matter nothing to Bel, who obviously looked down on her, from the attitude of her twenty-nine years, with a

mild good-humoured contempt. But it would matter greatly to Mark;—and that sufficed.

She rose at last and wandered round the beloved room. Before the Viking she stood a long while, trying to draw the valiant soul of him into her own soul: then she went reluctantly out.

As she closed the door behind her, Mark opened his own and smilingly confronted her. "Hullo! Is that the way you dress for dinner?"

She coloured a little under his gaze.

"I couldn't resist going in—just to greet them all."

"Well—you might have let me come too! Are they such very special friends?"

"A part of me—almost," she said very low. "I've known most of them—haven't I?—ever since they were born."

Then she went quickly down the passage; and for several seconds Mark stood looking after her. The sudden softening of his whole face, could she have seen it, would have been balm to her heart.

CHAPTER II

> The heavens such grace did lend her
> That she might admired be.
>
> SHAKESPEARE.

NEXT morning early, Mark drove Maurice to the main line station, despatched him with a final volley of chaff, and proceeded patiently to tramp the lane outside till the down train should bring him the desire of his eyes. From the station-master he learnt that "she" might be anything from twenty minutes to two hours late. Yesterday five specials had run through, packed with horses and men, and there would be more to-night.

"Jolly for they Germans, sir!" he added with a jovial wink. "They *do* say now that the British Army will be keeping Christmas in Berlin!"

"And on the other side they say the Kaiser will keep it in London," Mark answered him. "Best leave fairy tales to the Germans. It's their line!"

And he retired to commune with his own heart in the lane.

The train gave him ample time to lose patience and recapture it; and the longer he waited, the brighter grew the halo round Bel's golden head. Idealist as he was, in art and life, he could not choose but idealise the woman he loved: if, indeed, he were not rather in love with a phantom of his own brain, who wore the

appearance and spoke with the voice of Bel. During the last ten days, while his conscious mind had been absorbed in things practical, the subconscious, unoccupied artist in him had been sedulously gilding her halo; and as for that bewildering jar in Scotland, he had so completely credited her with his own sensitiveness on the subject, that his one wish was to make her forget it had ever been. He had shrunk even from asking her to speak of it to his mother; and had made the request in his last letter, rather than spring an unpleasantness on her by way of greeting.

And now—all he craved was herself. Her letters were not the same thing at all. Clever, affectionate and often amusing, they seemed just to miss something that, for him, was the secret of her charm. In them the slightly studied effect of her whole attitude to life seemed more definitely artificial; and after reading them, a troubled uncertainty was apt to pervade his mind. But sight and touch of her would cure all such lover's folly——

Ah—the whistle at last!

He reached the platform as the train drew up, and there emerged from a distant carriage the tall, unmistakable figure in a bluish coat and skirt and close-fitting hat. About midway down the platform they met and clasped hands. She coloured a little when their eyes met; but they merely talked of luggage and the lateness of the train.

It is a common experience, that first, faint shock of actual meeting after keen anticipation; and in these two it waked the undersense that, although they had taken the most hazardous step in life, they were still comparative strangers. In some vague way they

seemed to have lost touch; to have become suddenly shy of each other—the man more so than the girl.

Shy or no, she was contented, utterly, to be sitting there beside him in the August sunlight, speeding between stretches of ripe cornland; between purple sweeps of heather, when they climbed a ridge; and on through rolling open country where the earlier trees showed a yellow leaf or two, and the oaks were still sunset-tinted with their second blossoming. England, relying serenely upon her grey ghosts of the North Sea, lay dozing in the high noon of the year, while little Belgium, like another Kate Barlass, thrust her arm through the staple that the murderers might be stayed, if only for a moment. A Territorial Camp, an occasional motor decked with flags, a group of khaki figures resting in the shade—these were the sole reminders of that invisible horror across the Channel, that for Bel was no more than the shadow of a shadow, though the cloud of it overhung her own life and set visibly upon her lover's brow.

Every now and then she took stock of him under her eyelids, from his rough motor-cap and his sensitive mouth, safe-guarded by that uncompromising chin, to the lean, strong fingers controlling the machine. A woman could safely entrust her destiny to that mouth and those hands, though she might wish, incidentally, that he would take a less exaggerated view of this singularly inopportune war. It was just her luck that it should have been timed to spoil the most promising "phase " of her life. If only Mark's admirable virility were tempered by a touch of Rex Maitland's intelligent common sense, matters would be so much easier and pleasanter all round. And the

coming interview with Lady Forsyth was a nuisance, to put it mildly: but still——

"Have I given you time to get through the worst of your troublesome affairs?" she asked after an interchange of commonplaces that led nowhere. "I'm hoping for a clear field as the reward of my lost week."

He gave her a contrite glance.

"I wish it were clearer. Russell, my land-agent, has played up like a Trojan. But the wood seems to thicken as one goes on. And to-day I'm booked for a recruiting show at Bramleigh. No getting out of it. Sir Nevil Sinclair—the artist, you know—said I *must* manage to placate you somehow. So please *be* placated and save me the managing!"

Down went the corners of her mouth. "Our first day! And not even Mr. Lenox to play with."

"Won't Sheila do?"

"As a substitute for *you?* Mark, your modesty is incredible! Is she with you still?"

"She came back yesterday."

"And Mr. Macnair?"

"Yes."

"Are they part of your permanent family, those two?"

"More or less. People just accrue to Mums. Are you placated now—Queen of Wynchcombe Friars?"

She laid gloved finger-tips on his knee.

"I'm trying to be. I vowed a vow to be heavenly good this time, to make up for. . . ."

His hand closed on hers.

"That's over and done with," he said. "I'm sorry—even about Mother. But it seemed only fair. I'll take you to her straight——"

"I'd prefer half an hour first with her son—*not* in a motor on the open road! Darling, give me time to feel more at home."

His eyes sought hers. "I'm agreeable. We'll stop at the gate and go up through the wood. I can fetch the car afterwards. No superfluous attendants these days!"

On a cushion of moss in the cool of the pine-wood, they recaptured the atmosphere of Scotland and the little cloud of estrangement melted away. Mark, who had keenly felt the momentary jar, was the more relieved.

"Now, my darling girl, time's up," he said, reluctant, but inflexible; "Mother will be picturing us wrecked on the road, and sending poor old Keith to pick up the pieces! Come."

At that, she knelt upright, and, with a charmingly tender air of proprietorship, passed her hands over his head, bringing them to rest on his shoulders. "I'm glad I've found you again," she said. "That strange man at the station rather alarmed me."

"*You* knew how to conjure him away, you witch!" he answered, stopping her lips with a kiss.

She accepted the kiss, but not his tacit dismissal of the subject. For her, a new sensation not analysed was a sensation wasted.

"I suppose it was that things hadn't time to crystallise properly after the break," she went on, twisting a button between her finger and thumb. "I hope the War Office will be merciful and allow us a good spell this time. Separations are rather uncanny things. You never quite know——"

"Well, if you don't know me when I get back this

evening," he said, with perfect gravity, "the marriage that has been arranged, etc., had better not take place."

"Mark!" Her voice had a sharp, startled note.

"That'll learn you!" he retorted, smiling. "We'll make out our 'para' to-morrow."

And he heard no more of the subject.

They found Lady Forsyth alone in the drawing-room reading her midday post.

"My dears!" She sprang up to greet them. "We've been wondering what had come to you."

Mark explained, asked a few questions, backed casually towards the door—and vanished, leaving the women alone.

Bel had resolved that there should be neither awkwardness nor hesitation. Already she had rehearsed the little scene half a dozen times; and as the door closed, she turned to the small, upright figure near the piano, both hands flung out.

"Dear Lady Forsyth, you *are* going to forgive me, aren't you? I know I don't deserve it. But Mark has been so beautifully generous——"

"That is easier for him than for his mother," Lady Forsyth rejoined with her disconcerting frankness: but her smile made partial atonement and she took the proffered hands. "Not that I'm belittling Mark's generosity. It takes a just man to be generous even in exasperating circumstances; and Mark possesses that rare quality in a high degree. He particularly wants us all to make light of the whole matter; and—to please him, Bel, I can at least condone what I can't pretend to understand."

This—as may be supposed—was not precisely the

oue Bel had prepared for herself. But she had the adaptability of the born actress; and she recognised that Lady Forsyth had paid her the embarrassing compliment of speaking her mind as to a daughter.

"That's rather a crushing form of forgiveness!" she said, with the pretty droop of her lips. "And I don't suppose it's much use trying to explain. . . ."

"Not the slightest, my dear." Lady Forsyth's tone was brisk but kindly. "Facts, like beauty, are best left unadorned. I take it for granted you must have been very much upset to hurt a brave man so unnecessarily. Had your refusal been final, I could have better understood."

The girl flinched at that and bit her lip. "You don't sound much like forgiving me. And I don't think," she made bold to add, "that Mark would be quite pleased if he heard you."

"He would probably bite my head off," Lady Forsyth answered, taking the wind out of her sails. "And if you want to make him angry with me, you can tell him what I have said. I should say just the same if he were present. Mark and I are in complete accord, however much we squabble. He knows my bark is worse than my bite: and you'll soon know it too, Bel. So don't let's write in brass what is meant to be writ in water. We shall gain nothing by making Mark our apple of discord. He's a very large apple, big enough for two! Now, after that, let me 'behave' and show you to your room. Later on, you must see over the dear old house."

"Yes. It's a dream of a place." Bel swerved thankfully to a more congenial subject and the still

more congenial reflection that all this stately, soft-toned beauty would some day be her own.

Once this wretched war was over, everything would go swimmingly. He would settle down and shed some of his troublesome ideals. That flat in town—which she had already chosen and furnished mentally—would be the best possible antidote for what she vaguely styled "that sort of thing." She washed her hands and tidied her smooth hair in a frame of mind too serene even to be clouded by the prospect of a whole afternoon without Mark.

And downstairs, alone in the drawing-room, Lady Forsyth was playing Grieg's Temple Dance with a fire and fury that brought Keith in from the terrace, startled concern in his eyes.

"Bless my soul, Helen! Who are you wanting to murder now? The Crown Prince or one of our own super-Solomons?"

"Neither," she answered, crashing out the last double chord. Then, swinging round on the stool she faced him with heightened colour, head in air. "It's Mark's future wife. And I'm in terror that he'll want to marry before he goes out. Keith—it's not only wicked prejudice. I distrust her more than ever. She came to me with a pretty, ready-made apology which I am afraid I dislocated by my incurable candour. Then, having let fly for my own satisfaction, I proceeded to smooth things over for love of Mark. Told her my bark was worse than my bite."

"That I can swear to," Keith struck in smiling.

"Still—by every oath I mustn't use, if I was a natural savage instead of a Christian woman, who adores her son, I'd *bite* her with all my teeth—There!

Between that and Grieg, I feel a little better. But, oh, you sagacious bachelor, you have your divine compensations. At times it's a positive curse to love any human thing better than your own soul."

"It is that," Macnair agreed with quiet emphasis, as the door opened to admit Mark himself.

The air seemed still to vibrate with Helen's impassioned outburst, and he glanced quickly from one to the other.

"What have you two been plotting—eh?"

"The wholesale reconstruction of the universe!" Keith answered lightly; but Mark went straight to his mother and laid his hand on her.

"She's been working herself up about nothing," he said. "I can feel her quivering all through. Keith, you oughtn't to encourage her. She'll be needing all her reserves of strength, if she's to pull through this. Would the drive to Bramleigh calm you down, Motherling? Or would it churn you up again, hearing me speak?"

"No: I should love it," she answered in a low voice. The invitation and the touch of his hand had soothed her already, as nothing else could have done. It was as if, by some telepathic process, he had divined the cause of her emotional stress; and when the two girls came in he said casually, without removing his hand: "I'm carrying Mums off with me to Bramleigh. You've had your drive, Bel, and the outing will do her a power of good."

The announcement faintly ruffled Bel's conviction that all was for the best in this best of all possible worlds. But later in the evening, when her own turn came, when she wandered with Mark through the

terraced gardens down to the river, he found her apparently satisfied, if not communicative, as regards her interview of the morning. Convinced of her own supreme sovereignty, instinct told her that she would gain nothing by "giving the woman away."

CHAPTER III

"I am the Fact," said War, "and I stand astride the path of Life. . . . There can be nothing else and nothing more in human life until you have reckoned with me."—H. G. WELLS.

THAT same evening, a good deal later on, Lady Forsyth sat at her dressing-table, brushing out her hair, recalling, with pride, Mark's vivid speech, the cheers, the record "bag" of recruits, and wondering if he would forget to come for his usual good night.

His room opened out of hers; and the door between stood chronically ajar—a companionable habit begun in her first days of loneliness after his father's death. He rarely missed the little ceremony of early tea, when he would establish himself at the foot of the bed and argue or read aloud, or simply "rag" her, as the spirit moved him. Then he would wander in and out, in the later stages of dressing, hindering and delighting her in about equal measure. Or they would carry on a violent argument through the open door, a pair of disembodied voices, till some climax would bring one or other gesticulating to the threshold. These morning and evening hours were the times of their most formidable encounters, their wildest nonsense, their utmost joy in each other's society, exhibited in a manner peculiar to themselves. At night the "hair-brush interview" had become a regular institution. It might be over in ten minutes or last till

midnight, according to their mood. This was the time for graver matters, for the give and take of advice; and although there might be little outward show of sentiment, those hours of comradeship were among the most sacred treasures of the mother's heart.

To-night she brushed till her arm ached, listening for his footstep; and the moment she put the hated thing down, he came, bringing with him the whiff of cigarette smoke she loved.

Standing behind her, he took her head between his hands, lightly passing his fingers through her hair and smiled at her in the glass. She was responsive as a cat when her hair was caressed; and he knew it.

"Poor deserted little Mums!" he said. "Had you given me up in despair?"

"Absolutely."

"And how long would you have hung on past despair point?" he asked with a twinkle.

"Probably half an hour. . . . What have you done with your lady-love?"

"Ordered her to bed."

"So early? All for my benefit? I scent an ulterior motive."

He laughed and pulled her hair. "Your instinct's infallible! It's this marrying business. I know I promised to wait; but the whole face of the world has changed since then."

He detected the faint compression of her lips.

"Mums, you're incorrigible. She's a delicious thing."

"Who says otherwise?"

"You do—internally! Not a mite of use throwing dust in my eyes. When you're converted—as you

will be—I shall know it, to the tick of a minute. Meantime"—he moved over to the window and stood there facing her—"the question is, in a war like this, oughtn't one to marry, if possible, before going out? She got on to war weddings this evening, and I was tongue-tied. That mustn't happen again. What's your notion? D'you still think—wait?"

A pause. She dreaded, as he did, the possibility of Wynchcombe Friars passing into the hands of Everard Forsyth and his son, whose views were not their views, except in matters political. Had the wife in question been Sheila, her answer would have been unhesitating. As it was, she parried his awkward question with another.

"What do you think yourself, Mark?"

He laughed.

"Oh, you clever woman! I have my answer. And in this case I believe you're right. Personally, I'm game to marry her at once. But . . . there *are* other considerations. Seems her precious Harry's been rubbing into her that these war marriages aren't fair on women—that it's a bigger shadow on their lives losing a husband than a lover. It's a tragic sort of start, I admit; and once we're married the wrench of separation would surely be harder for both. Then, as regards myself, *you* know how this coming struggle has obsessed my mind; how we've doubted, both of us, the spirit of modern England—the selfish, commercial spirit of the red-necktie brand. And now that I see the old country shaming our doubts, I simply want to fling myself into this business—heart and brain and body. And, frankly, I've a feeling I could give myself to things with a freer

mind . . . as a bachelor. That's the truth—for your very private ear. Thirdly and lastly, if we married, she ought to be here with you, and I'm doubtful if you'd either of you relish that arrangement, lacking me to do buffer state. See?"

"I do see, very clearly," she answered, regarding him with grave tenderness, her elbows on the table, her chin in her hands.

"Thought you would. There's only one thing worries me. As my wife—if the worst happened, she'd at least be well provided for. Seems she has literally no money, and a very fair gift for spending it."

Helen's quick brain—lightened by her relief—sprang to instant decision. "You could settle that by adding a codicil to your will. Those investments of father's that are not tied up with the place would give her quite a comfortable income."

"Capital!" he cried, slapping his leg. "Fool I was not to think of it. Simply forestall my instructions about her marriage settlement. We'll fix it up at once and I'll talk things over with her to-morrow. See how she feels about it herself."

They discussed details for another half-hour; then, in his peremptory fashion, he ordered her to bed.

"God bless you," she whispered as he shed a kiss on her hair. "This afternoon I was the proudest mother in England."

"O fool woman—just because I caught the gift of the gab! With practice I might even degenerate into a politician. Just as well I'm in for a few years of the silent service. Go to sleep quick, and don't let yourself be bogey ridden by German devilments."

But though wisdom endorsed his command, she disobeyed it flatly. There was no sleep in her brain; and instead of going to bed, she sat down in the window-seat, leaned against the woodwork and looked out upon the still serenity of garden, terrace, and pine wood, softly illumined by an unclouded moon. The very peace and beauty of those moonlit August nights had an uncanny power of intensifying the inner visions that daylight and ceaseless occupation kept partially in check. She could not now look upon the moon without seeing the sacked villages, the human wreckage of battle that the same impartial goddess illumined, over there, on the shell-battered fields of Belgium and France.

Earlier in the day her spirit had been uplifted by Miss Sorabji's beautiful letter "England in Earnest," by her exhortation, from the Gita, "Think of this not as a war, but as a sacrifice of arms demanded of the gods." But now, in the peace and silence of night, it was the anguish of the flight from Tirlemont that lived before her eyes and chilled her blood. Too vividly, she pictured the flaming town; the rush of panic-stricken people; women and children, shot, bayoneted, ruthlessly ridden down. And already there were whispers of things infinitely worse than killing—things unnamable, at thought of which imagination blenched——

From that great, confused mass of misery there emerged the pathetic figure of one fugitive peasant woman and five children who stood bewildered in the Place de la Gare, crying all of them as if their hearts would break. That morning the German soldiery had killed the woman's husband and trampled two

of her children to death before her face—a minor item in an orgy of horrors. But it is poignant personal detail that pierces the heart: and the acute realisation of one mother's anguish brought sudden tears to Helen's eyes.

So blurred was the moonlit garden, when she looked down into it, that a shadow moving at the end of the terrace set her heart fluttering in her throat.

Spy hunting and spy mania were in the air. Almost every day brought its crop of tales, credible and incredible: horses poisoned wholesale at Aldershot, mysterious gun-emplacements, hidden arms and ammunition in the least expected places. Even allowing for exaggeration, such rumours were sufficiently disturbing. They gave a creepy, yet rather thrilling sense of insecurity to things as perennially and unshakably secure as the Bank of England or Westminster Abbey. Nor could even these symbols of stability be reckoned immune, with the financial world in convulsions and a mysterious fleet of Zeppelins threatening to bombard London!

In the over-civilised and over-legislated world, that came by a violent end in July, 1914, the uncertainty of life had been little more than a pious phrase, spasmodically justified by events. Now it was an impious fact, vaguely or acutely felt almost every hour of the day—by none more acutely than by Helen Forsyth with her quick sensibilities and vivid brain. Even Mark admitted that she was keeping her head creditably on the whole; but in certain moods she was quite capable of demanding a drastic search for gun-emplacements in her own grounds or suspecting a secret store of ammunition

among the ruins of Wynchcombe Abbey, all on the strength of a semi-German gardener dismissed years ago. Only last week a suspicious, Teutonic-looking individual had come to the back door and put the cook "all in a tremor" by asking superfluous questions about the neighbourhood. And now this mysterious wanderer in the garden—at such an hour——!

She was on her feet, brushing aside the tears that obscured her vision. But the shadow had vanished behind a bush and did not seem disposed to reappear. For a second she stood hesitating. If she called Mark, he would either laugh at her or scold her for not being in bed. The creature was probably harmless. She would creep down-stairs quietly and explore. For all her nerves and fanciful fears, she was no coward in the grain. Hastily twisting up her hair, she slipped on a long opera coat and crept noiselessly down into the drawing-room. There she found that the French window leading on to the terrace had been left unlocked.

"How careless of Mark!" she murmured; and, with fluttering pulse, stepped out into the moonlight.

There he was again! Summoning all her courage she went forward, uncertain even now what she meant to say.

The shadowy figure had turned. It was coming towards her. Then—with a start of recognition she stopped dead.

"Keith!" she exclaimed softly, and could have laughed aloud in her relief.

"Helen—what are you doing out here?" he asked, an odd thrill in his low voice.

"What are *you* doing?" she retorted. "Frightening

me out of my life! I saw a suspicious-looking shadow; and—don't laugh at me—I thought it might be a spy."

"And you came down to tackle him alone! Just like you! Supposing it had been?"

"Oh—thank *good*ness it's not! But don't you ever give me away." Helen's laugh ended in an involuntary shiver.

"Cold?" he asked quickly.

"No—no! Let's walk a little and feel normal."

He moved on beside her, anxious, yet deeply content. Then: "Helen," he said suddenly. "If you're going to let things get on your nerves like this, you'll be done for. Your best chance is to take up some absorbing war-work; the harder the better."

"What work? And where?"

He caught a note of desperation in her tone. "Scrubbing hospital floors? Or playing about with Belgians and invalids here, while Sheila is at Boulogne, you scouring France in our car, and Mark in the thick of it all? He wants me to stay here, I know. But, Keith, I simply *can't*. What else, though, can a useless woman of fifty do?"

"To start with, she can refrain from calling herself useless, which is a libel! To go on with—" He paused, regarding her. The supposed spy was meditating a bold suggestion. "Helen—could you . . . would you . . . come out with me as my orderly? If so, I could confine my activities to the Base. I verily believe you'd find the real thing less nerve-racking than the nightmares of an imagination like yours. But, could you stand it, physically? And . . . would the conventions permit?"

Her low laugh answered him straight away. "My dear Keith, talk of inspiration! It would just save my soul alive. I can act infinitely better than I can endure. I should feel nearer to Mark. And as for the conventions, I hanged them all years ago. What harm, if the poor dead things are drawn and quartered?" She checked herself and looked up at him. "Will you take your Bible oath that I shouldn't simply be in the way?"

"I'll take it on as many Bibles as you like to produce," he answered, with becoming gravity. "But I'm thinking . . . for your sake . . . another woman. . . . How about Sheila?"

"Sheila! Lovely."

"Would she give up her precious massage?"

"If I wanted her she'd give up anything. But—the massage wouldn't bring her up against the worst horrors. Your work would. And she's full young—barely three and twenty."

"She is that. Though, if I'm any good at observation, I should say the stature of her spirit is far in advance of her years. She gives me the impression of great reserve power, that girl. She never seems to put out her full strength, or to waste it in kicking against the pricks."

"One for me!" Lady Forsyth murmured meekly.

"Yes, one for you! And I make bold to prophesy she would be worth five of you in a painful emergency!"

He made that unflattering statement in a tone of such extraordinary tenderness that she beamed as at a compliment.

"Let the righteous smite me friendly—when I

deserve it! You seem to have made a close study of my Sheila. It only remains to secure her services and Mark's consent——"

"*Mother!*" His deep voice called suddenly from the window. "I'm ashamed of you. Come to bed at once!"

"Coming!" she called back, adding under her breath: "Keith, remember I only came down for a book. And you found me locking you out."

Then she hurried away, obedient always to the voice of her son.

Nightmares had been effectually dispelled.

Bel's hope that the War Office would be merciful was not fulfilled. The Juggernaut across the Channel would not stand still at any one's bidding. The Great Man who worked day and night, creating new armies, had need of every promising semblance of an officer he could lay hands on; and Mark's name was a recommendation in itself.

Bel was given little more than a week in which to be "heavenly good"; and it must be admitted that she made the most of it. She took kindly, on the whole, to Mark's solution of the marriage problem. How far her acquiescence was due to his exceeding thoughtfulness in the matter of money it might be invidious to enquire. There remained the fact that Harry O'Neill—scenting a possible war wedding—had skilfully put forward her own pronounced views on the subject; while, incidentally, spoiling her idol more egregiously than ever. And the girl herself leaned towards a more auspicious beginning of her married life. Mark found her oddly superstitious

on the subject; and, with her gift for evading unpleasant facts, she had risen readily to the optimistic conviction that the war would be over by Christmas or the New Year. Apparently it did not occur to her, or to others of her persuasion, that a short war could only spell victory for Germany. But there seemed little use in dispelling an illusion that kept her happy; and, in her case, could do no harm.

So she clung unchallenged to her comforting belief; and, the great question being settled, Mark was free to consider other matters.

First and foremost, there was Keith's amazing proposition to enlist Mums—a project that did not square with Mark's private plan for keeping her safely wrapped in cotton wool and harmless war-activities at Wynchcombe Friars. Son-like, he had scarce realised how infinitely dear she was to him, till her eagerness to cross the Channel had driven him to consider the possibility in all its bearings. And the inclusion of Sheila in the programme brought to light his hidden tenderness for her that seemed in no way diminished by his passion for Bel. Why the deuce couldn't the women be reasonable, and stay in England where there would be work enough for all? And what business had Keith to go encouraging them? But so plainly were the three enamoured of their idea that in the end he had not the heart to damp them.

In the privacy of his thoughts, he thanked goodness that Bel could be trusted not to emulate them; though her attitude towards the war was now less hostile than it had been. The very air she breathed was impregnated with war-fever, war-talk and war-realities. It was increasingly evident that new war-

activities were going to become the fashion; and she was of those who unquestioningly follow a fashion, lead it where it may. Having no taste for the menial work of hospitals or for tending the sick and wounded, she had elected to help in some sort of women's work engineered by Harry, "the Cause" being temporarily extinct. So far as possible she turned away her eyes from beholding and her heart from feeling the full measure of the invisible horror, which, to more imaginative minds, became too acutely visible and audible during that critical last week of August, 1914.

For by now, across the Channel, the Great Retreat had begun. Days that, at Wynchcombe Friars, slipped by all too fast, seemed over there, to have neither beginning nor end. Common standards of time were lost in that ceaseless, sleepless nightmare of dogged marching and still more dogged fighting, whenever Prussian hordes gave the broken remnant of an army a chance to turn and smite, as the British soldier can smite even in retreat.

It was from Le Cateau that an officer friend sent a pencil scrawl to Mark.

"It is quite evident that we have taken the knock badly. With any other army one would say we're beaten. But Tommy doesn't understand the word. You can only beat him by knocking the life out of him. And even when you think he's dead, chances are he'll get up and kick you. People at home simply haven't begun to know what heroes these chaps are. Makes me sick even to think of certain supercilious folk, I seem to remember, who thought

the worst of any man in uniform on principle. Great Scott, they're not fit to lick Tommy's boots."

Mark handed that letter to Bel.

"There's one in the eye for your precious Maitland," he remarked coolly. "Copy it out verbatim, please, and send it to him with my compliments!"

And Bel obeyed with exemplary meekness. She had rather objected to the tone of Maitland's last letter; and, in her own fashion, she was very much impressed. Heroism, a long way off and entirely unconnected with one's self, was an admirable thing in man.

It was near the end of August, when the Channel ports were being evacuated and the fall of Paris seemed merely a matter of days, that Mark at last found his name in the *Gazette* coupled with that of a distinguished Highland regiment; and in record time he was ready—uniform, equipment, parting presents and all.

Like most of his race and kind, he would have preferred an informal departure—casual "good-byes," as though he were going off on business for a week or so. But he had won the hearts of his people by justice, understanding, and the personal touch that was a tradition at Wynchcombe Friars: he had inspired them, by precept and exhortation, to give of their best ungrudgingly; and he could not deny them the legitimate thrill of speeding his departure with congratulations and cheers.

Only on Sunday, his last day, he evaded one ordeal by limiting his attendance at church to early service

with his mother. Bel had little taste for early rising, and Mark did not press the point.

In the afternoon he delighted his humbler friends—wives of the gamekeeper, the coachman and the manager of his arts and crafts colony—by calling on them in full uniform. Though he occasionally wore the kilt and glengarry at Inveraig, his Hampshire folk had never seen him thus attired; and their open admiration was so embarrassing that, after several hours of it, he returned limp and exhausted, clamouring for whisky and soda and the society of Bel, who could always be trusted to keep her admiration within bounds.

To her he devoted the evening; and early on Monday the more personal farewells must be said, the cheerful, casual note vigorously maintained. It was not "the real thing" yet; and the women, in their hearts, prayed that the "the real thing" might be deferred for many months to come. Meantime, unless England was favoured with an invasion, he would be safe enough on the south-east coast of Scotland; and later on, if rooms were available, he would permit his mother and Bel to intrude upon his violent industry for a week.

Keith drove them all to the station, and behold, outside the grey stone gateway, an impromptu guard of honour lined the road to Wendover: villagers and farm hands, weavers and metal-workers, women, children, and ineligible men. At sight of the motor, they broke into shouts and ragged cheers that would have moved a heart many degrees less responsive than the heart of Mark Forsyth.

"Drive slower, man," he said to Keith; and, stand-

ing up in the car, he waved his glengarry—giving them shout for shout—till he could no more.

That vision of him, so standing, with the morning light in his eyes, the sun upon his chestnut-red hair and his kilt blown back by the wind, remained stamped indelibly upon his mother's brain.

CHAPTER IV

"Hearts that are as one high heart,
Withholding nought from doom or bale,
Burningly offered up—to bleed,
To bear, to break, but not to fail."

LAURENCE BINYON.

THE dream of that coveted week at Mark's war station materialised about the middle of September. More: it was a success; a blessed memory unspoiled by any jarring note, and it brought the two women nearer to each other than they had been yet.

They found Mark, in charge of a double company chiefly armed with broom-sticks, handling his Highlanders to some purpose; giving his spare hours to revolver practice, with plump German targets in view. His Colonel, who lost no time in making friends with Lady Forsyth, spoke of him in glowing terms, and gave his women folk every facility for seeing the coast defences prepared against the promised invasion. They wandered, shivering inwardly, through a maze of genuine trenches, heavily sandbagged, that, in the event of a landing, were to be held "at all costs." They inspected cunning entanglements of barbed wire on the beach and underground forts that looked more like heat bumps on the face of the earth than strong defensive positions; and they heard amazing stories of spies, though the Govern-

ment had nominally demolished the system. They had tea with half a dozen jilted officers, on a bare deal table, in an upper room of a house that had been shorn of its furniture to accommodate Mark, with two fellow subalterns and three hundred men.

Everything conspired to make those few September days an untarnished memory. The tide of retreat had turned. The miracle had happened and the Germans, flung back from the gates of Paris, had been brilliantly defeated on the Marne. India's response to the call of her King-Emperor had sent a thrill through the whole kingdom: and some impeccable authority—name unknown—reported hundreds of Russians at Ostend. Hopeful souls dreamed again of a swift and decisive issue. But the Great Brain piling up armies in Whitehall still pinned his faith on England's "last million men."

In fact, there was only one flaw in the week of their content; it passed too soon. Then the price must be paid in the renewed wrench of parting; and for the first time Lady Forsyth saw tears in Bel's eyes.

Of course they must come again, Mark assured them at the last. "The C. O. has fallen in love with Mums! He'd be heartbroken if I didn't give him another chance. And he's a useful chap to please. So that settles it!"

But towards the end of September, before there was time even to think of another chance, Mark had his orders. A decimated battalion was clamouring for reinforcements; and a message flashed to Wynchcombe Friars that he would be home next day on forty-eight hours leave, picking up Bel in town.

That blunt announcement drove the blood from Lady Forsyth's face. Sheila was back with her again; and Keith had just returned from a week's absence on business connected with the Forsyth-Macnair Car.

"He's got his wish," was all she said: and went quickly out of the room.

Next morning they arrived—the two of them; Mark rather defiantly cheerful, Bel more than a little subdued. Lady Forsyth had never liked the girl better than in those two days.

To the women it seemed hard that so many of his precious hours at home must be squandered on business. But Mark had to face the fact that he might never return; and to make his dispositions accordingly. It had always been his wish to emulate his father and be practically his own land-agent. But four years of minority and the long absence in Europe had obliged him to employ a trustworthy man of experience: and he was thankful for it now. George Russell, happily well over forty, had proved as capable as he was devoted: which is saying a good deal for his capacity. He possessed, moreover, a shrewder business head than either mother or son: and, on occasion, to Mark's huge delight, he would assume a tenderly protective attitude, as of one whose mission in life was to save them from themselves.

In the matter of Belgian refugees, for instance, he regretted to report that Lady Forsyth was not sufficiently discriminating. They were proving, as was natural, "a very mixed lot," and Russell had a positive flair for the wrong sort. It was not fair on Sir Mark to crowd up his cottages with "foreign riff-

raff": the deserving would make a quite sufficient drain on his limited resources. The good fellow learnt with unconcealed relief that Lady Forsyth would soon be going to Boulogne with Miss Melrose and that he would be left practically in charge of everything. They had decided to lend the house to Sir Richard's two sisters chiefly with a view to keeping it available for hospitality to officers, wounded or otherwise. The little colony of arts and crafts had dwindled considerably: but the workshops were not to be altogether closed down. Lady Forsyth was anxious to encourage refugee lace-makers, Belgian and French.

Mark himself was thankful for business details that relieved the underlying strain. But he refused on this occasion to bid any official "Good-byes." He had taken leave of his people when he joined the army. This final wrench was his own most private and personal affair as they would doubtless understand.

Tea on the terrace was a creditably cheerful meal; and it was not till near dinner-time that Mark managed to slip away by himself for an hour of quiet communing with the land he loved—the woods, the river, and the lordly ruins that, for him, were written all over with the inner history of his own brief twenty-seven years. Bel had asked him more than once how he could bear to leave it all: and to-night, as he saw the red sun tangled among his pine tops, that question so shook his fortitude that he challenged it with another. Could he bear to think of German troops defiling the fair and stately face of it, terrorising with torture and outrage, the men and women whose welfare was his main concern in life? Con-

fronted with that challenge, the coward question fled ashamed.

After dinner he had half an hour's talk with Sheila, into whose hands he solemnly commended his more mercurial mother. "She's a jewel of price," he added frankly, "but in certain moods, she takes some managing. And on the whole you're better at it than old Keith. Don't let her crock up from the strain of it all. And write to me. Promise."

She promised—and his mind felt more at rest.

Later on he took Bel out on to the terrace, where they paced up and down in the starlight, talking fitfully. Time was too short for all they had to say: and for that very reason they could not say one half of it. Interludes of silence increased. At last came one so prolonged that, by a mutual impulse, they came to a standstill, near a low stone bench, confronting each other and the inexorable fact.

"Oh Mark—to-morrow!" Bel breathed unsteadily, her dim face close to his. "It seems impossible."

For answer he took hold of her: and sitting down, gathered her on to his knees. Then, amazed, he heard her whisper at his ear: "Darling—I'm horribly afraid. I keep feeling—I shall never get you back."

It was spoken at last, the fear of perpetual parting that knocked at both their hearts. But the man knew that spectre must be ignored. "I'll come back with any luck, my Bel," he said, kissing her, "to claim you for good, and worry your life out! I vote we marry the first leave I get."

He passed his hand slowly down her bare arm. "Darling, you're cold," he said. "There's a dew

and a half falling. Come in at once. Are we downhearted?—No!"

The light of the hall showed her on the verge of tears. But she pulled herself together and he dismissed her with a blessing that meant more to him than to her.

In the drawing-room he found Keith alone, with a solitary electric light switched on, smoking by the open window; a privilege Helen permitted him for the sake of his company.

"Hullo! Gone—both of 'em?" Mark asked in surprise.

"Yes. I ordered them off. They looked strained and tired. Couldn't read. Couldn't talk. Your mother has some letters to write, I think. She left word—would you look in?"

"Bless her, she takes things beastly hard."

"She does," Keith assented briefly: and Mark proceeded to fill his pipe.

During the process Keith watched him, appraising his straight, clean manhood and cursing the devilish nature of modern war.

Presently, when Mark had finished with his pipe, he spoke.

"Keith, old chap, on the strength of peculiar circumstances and the general uncertainty of things, I'm going to make an infernally impertinent remark. To begin with, Mother's most distractingly on my mind. I've fixed up most things, with a view to—possible contingencies. But I don't seem able to fix up her. If I'm knocked out she's simply done for. Not even this precious work of hers for consolation. It all goes to Uncle Everard who'll make an end of

our colony straight away. She'll lose everything at a stroke, except Inveraig. And she—alone there——!"

He set his teeth; and Keith passed a long thin hand across his eyes. "That's the tragedy of it," he said; adding, with forced lightness, "Where does the impertinence come in?"

"It's jolly well coming in now. Don't bite my head off. Truth is I'm not stone blind; and just lately—I've been wondering . . . why the deuce don't you make a match of it? You and Mums!"

Macnair started, and his face looked rather a queer colour in the dim light.

"Great heavens, Mark! Talk of explosives!"

For the moment he could get no further; and Mark was puzzled. "You mean—it's never occurred to you?"

"I mean nothing of the sort."

"Then I bet you *do* want to bite my head off——"

"I'm not . . . so sure," he said slowly. His voice was more natural now. "I always like your sledge-hammer directness. At the same time—" He rose and paced the length of the room revolving that amazing proposition.

"If I thought there was a ghost of a chance," Mark persisted, as Keith turned in his stride, "it would take a ton weight off my mind."

"Not to mention mine," Keith answered smiling; and when he reached the window he put a hand on Mark's shoulder. "As it seems a case of plain speaking to-night, I may as well admit the truth. She's been the star of my life for fifteen years—and I'd give all I possess to marry her."

Mark's eyebrows went up.

"And she ten years a widow! Why not have a shot at it, old chap, and make this Boulogne trip a sort of war honeymoon——"

"My dear boy! The pace you young fellows travel! And you ignore . . . there's Helen herself to be reckoned with——"

For the first time in his life Mark saw the blood mount into Keith's face and heard him hesitate over his mother's name;—phenomena that checked his fluency a little but rather increased his zeal.

"Well, if you don't have a try," he said, "hanged if the C. O. won't forestall you. He's dead smitten. Two lovers at fifty—she ought to be ashamed of herself!"

But Keith seemed no way perturbed by the possibility of a rival.

"*If* she ever marries again," he said quietly, "it will be myself. But, Mark, is it possible you've never realised that, for her, your father is still as much alive as when he walked this earth. There's a modest percentage of human beings so made, and a good few of them are Scots. For them there is actually neither death, nor separation. I believe your father still bars my way, as much as he did when—I first loved her. Of course . . . I may exaggerate!"

"Hope you do!" Mark was deeply moved. "She doesn't often speak of him to me."

"Nor to me. But—when she does, it's quite clear."

"'M. Rough luck! All the same, if the worst happens, give me your word you'll have a try . . . for her sake and mine as well as your own. No one would dream there's eight years between you."

Keith simply held out his hand and Mark's closed on it hard. The good understanding that had always existed between them was complete.

Mark found his mother writing letters in bed. He had accused her more than once of writing them in her bath. She looked strained and tired, as Keith said; but in her blue dressing-jacket with hair demurely parted and a thick plait over her shoulder, she appeared younger, if anything, than the man he had left downstairs.

"Incurable woman!" he said lightly. "Who's your victim this time?"

She told him; and while she read out snatches of her letter, Mark—watching her with new eyes—wondered, had she the least inkling? Would a word from him be of any service to Keith?

Curiosity impelled him to talk of the Boulogne trip, to enlarge on his confidence in Keith, and even to touch on the unconventional character of the whole plan. Neither in look nor tone could he detect a glimmer of after-thought or shadow of self-consciousness. The causes of her satisfaction were clear as daylight: longing to be in the same country as himself: candid pleasure in Keith's and Sheila's company and her innate love of getting off the beaten track.

"It's just one of the many beautiful things that a genuine, understanding friendship makes possible," she concluded, stamping and sealing her letter: and Mark began to feel rather sorry for Keith. But he wisely refrained from any hint of his own knowledge. It would probably do no good and would certainly spoil her pleasure in going.

Instead, he commandeered her writing board, an

act of tyranny that would normally have involved a fight. Her unnatural meekness hurt him more sharply than any words of love, could she have brought herself to speak them. When he came back to the bed, she indicated a little pile of Active Service Compendiums and a pocket Red-letter Testament on the table beside her. She had already given him his wrist watch and a silver flask.

"That *from* me," she said touching the Book, "and those *for* me. I shall be hungry for news remember and out of touch with Bel, who will get it all."

"Not quite all—faithless and unbelieving!" he answered echoing her lightness, then he added with decision. "You're not coming up to town, Mums; not even to the station—understand? It'll be bad enough having Bel. But she's cooler all through. No matter how brave you are, I can always feel you quivering inside. And I couldn't stand it. Nor could you."

She shook her head. "It was only—a temptation. Not to miss——"

A spasm crossed her face and he went down on his knees beside her.

"Darling, if we are going to make fools of ourselves," he said huskily. "I'd better be off. It's near midnight. Time you were asleep." No answer; and he spoke still lower. "Give me your blessing, Mums—like when I went to school."

Still without speaking she laid her hands on his bowed head; and from his heart he echoed her passionate silent plea for his safe return.

Then he stood up and kissed her good night——

For sheer misery and discomfort nothing could exceed the actual hour or two before departure. Bel could be with him in his room while he "completed his mobilisation." The rest could only hang about aimlessly, making futile talk or inventing futile occupations to keep thought at bay. In the background, several maids and a grey-haired butler hovered fitfully; and Bobs, a picture of abject misery, lay awaiting his master at the foot of the stairs.

He came at last, in a violent hurry, shouting an order to Keith and springing clean over the prostrate Bobs.

Bel followed more leisurely; flushed a little, but controlled. Then the hovering servants came forward and Helen slipped quietly into her husband's study.

There, at last, Mark came to her—followed closely by a tailless Bobs.

Somehow she contrived to smile. Then his arms were round her, crushing her to him.

"God bless you," he whispered. "Don't fret. It's going to be all right. And—if it isn't . . . it'll *still* be all right."

Then he kissed her again and let her go.

From the threshold he waved to her, smiling resolutely, though tears stood in his eyes. She waved back to him. The door shut between them. He was gone.

As she stood motionless, fighting back her grief, she was startled by that sharp, familiar pang in the region of her heart: and a momentary darkness as if a raven's wing had brushed across her eyes. She shivered and kneeled hastily down to comfort the desolate Bobs, while her tears fell, unchecked now, upon his rough brown head.

CHAPTER V

"Here is the hard paradox: war . . . truly devilish, bestial, senseless thing, produces in masses—as peace distinctly does not produce them—brothers and sisters to Christ."—G. B. DAWAR.

WYNCHCOMBE FRIARS without Mark was no place to tarry in; but there seemed no end to the delays; and Keith turned even these to good account by teaching Sheila to drive the Forsyth-Macnair car. Two drivers with one orderly would get through twice the work.

It was near the middle of October when, at last, they found themselves speeding towards Folkestone. Keith, who had laid aside philosophy "for the duration of the war," delighted in his own small ark of salvation as a Captain delights in his ship. From "stem to stern" she was as perfect as skill and money could make her; fitted up with four stretchers and bedding; crammed to the limit of her capacity with first aid appliances and a minimum of luggage.

Here and there autumn had laid a fiery finger on the woods. Birches and elms were tipped with gold. Otherwise the October sun riding in a cloudless heaven suggested high summer. Mark had been gone nearly two weeks. Two brief cheerful letters assured his mother he was alive and well. Till she could see him again, those simple facts were all that vitally con-

cerned herself; though pessimists prophesied invasion by Zeppelin and transport; and away over there—unseen, yet acutely felt—Belgium continued her heroic stand against the all-devouring, all-defiling German Army.

The fall of Antwerp, pronounced impregnable, had resounded through Europe like the knell of doom. For a time, even the bravest were shaken with dismay and the stream of refugees increased daily. The streets of Folkestone overflowed with that pitiful flotsam of wrecked cities. Some wept; some cursed; some prayed; but the prevailing expression was a terrible stunned indifference, as though shock on shock had hammered them into automata that could move and eat and sleep, but could no longer feel.

In Boulogne—when they reached it—the flotsam of wrecked battalions was more in evidence. Things were still primitive here as regards organisation: but already the place was an English colony. The British Red Cross Society was beginning to make things move and owners of private cars were doing splendid service. To these were now added the unrelated trio from Wynchcombe Friars. But their first objective was Rouen, where a young Stuart nephew lay badly wounded, craving for the sight of a face from home. His invalid mother could not get to him; so Lady Forsyth went in her stead, only to find on arrival that the boy had been dead an hour. For the sake of that faraway mother she asked to see him, though privately she dreaded the ordeal. She was aware, suddenly, of a very unheroic shrinking from close contact with the awful actualities of war. But

that shrinking in no way affected her zeal for the work in hand.

News that a train-load of casualties was expected that evening sent them full speed to the station; but it was dusk when they arrived to find the process of unloading begun. At the entrance, a group of Red Cross officials stood talking and laughing, hardened by habit to the painful scene. As the car drew up they crowded round, admiring it and questioning Macnair, while tragic burdens were being carried past them in the half light.

Helen, too overwrought to make allowances, wondered how Keith had the patience to answer them.

Presently, her attention was caught by a number of black shadows, like wheelbarrows abnormally large and high.

"What are those?" she asked a porter, and discovered that they were severely wounded men on wheeled stretchers either too brave or too exhausted to utter a sound of complaint.

At that she could restrain herself no longer.

"Keith," she exclaimed, flagrantly interrupting a Medical Authority with a passion for cars. "*Why* are those unfortunate men kept hanging about in this noisy place? Can't we get four of them away?"

But Medical Authority checked her impatience in a tone of mild reproof.

"Those fellows are all right where they are, Lady Forsyth," he said. "They're not fit to be moved off their stretchers. So we're waiting for the trams. If you like to back into the station, you may pick up some milder cases who'll be glad of a lift.

They backed in accordingly and picked up two

maimed men and a remarkably cheerful subaltern with his left arm in a sling and a bandage across one eye. As they passed out, Keith offered to return for another load; and to Helen's disgust, the offer was politely declined.

By the time they reached the field hospital—a collection of marquees, fitted up with electric light—it was nearly ten o'clock.

"Quite early; but we don't seem to be *wanted*; so I suppose we must go to bed," Helen remarked with doleful emphasis, as they re-settled the car. "I don't know what you think about it, Keith. *I* feel distinctly snubbed. Four out of three hundred! What's that?"

"A beginning—and no bad one!" Keith answered placidly, filling his pipe. "Fanshawe says if we report ourselves at Boulogne we shall get all the work we want. There's heavy fighting on the north. A big battle developing for Ypres and Calais."

To Boulogne they returned accordingly: and had no cause this time to feel either snubbed or superfluous. There was still a famine of cars at the Base and the wounded were arriving in thousands: their bodies mangled and mutilated; their spirits, in the main, unquenched.

Macnair and his party drove up to their Hotel at noon: and their greeting from the Red Cross Authority was very much to the point.

"All available cars wanted immediately at the Gare Maritime. Better get some lunch first."

That lunch was of the briefest. Keith dumped their luggage in the hall without so much as asking if there were rooms to be had. Helen did not even open

the coveted letter from Mark, till they were back in the motor, speeding towards the bare unsheltered Gare, where impromptu and comfortless hospital trains debouched their tragic loads. Mercifully the sun of that miraculous autumn still shone unclouded; and, by the time autumn gave place to the wettest winter in decades, better arrangements had been made.

All that afternoon they worked, unceasingly, and late into the night. Back and forth, back and forth between station and hospital; jolting inevitably over railway lines, and a strip of merciless cobble pavement that, for men with shattered limbs, hurriedly dressed, involved several minutes of excruciating agony.

"Keith, couldn't they possibly take up that cruel bit of pave?" Helen pleaded after their seventh journey with three men at death's door. "Even a raw road would be better than those stones."

"I'll move heaven and earth to get it improved," he assured her, little guessing that he had pledged himself to a labour of Hercules.

By the time they could take breath and think about finding beds, they were all dead weary, sustained only by the knowledge that they had given their mite of service to the utmost of their power. In Mark's letter, which Helen had scarcely found time to read, there was a sentence on this head that had haunted her brain throughout those strenuous hours.

"Oh Mums, if only the good casual folk at home could be made to *see* even the half of what we see in the way of wanton destruction, and calculated brutality, wherever the gentle German has left his trail, they'd

possibly begin to realise the powers of evil we're up against in this war and things in general would march to a different tune. But they can't *see*. That's the trouble. And hearing about such things isn't the same at all. If we're ever going to win through hell to human conditions again it won't be merely by signing cheques and making speeches, but by the individual personal service of every man and woman in whatever capacity; and I'm proud to feel you three are giving it like Trojans. God bless you all!"

She stood gleaning a few more scraps under an electric light, when Keith came up to say he had secured a room for her and Sheila; and a friendly Irish doctor had offered him a bed in his hospital train.

"I'm in great luck with my two assistants," he added smiling down at her eager, tired face. "Sheila betters my expectation, which is saying a good deal. Her self-possession to-day astonished me. She'd have the nerve for advance ambulance work in the firing line, I do believe. But I'm glad we've got her safe here.

He glanced towards her where she sat at a writing-table scribbling a hurried letter to Mark in praise of their mutually beloved Mums. Then he went up and touched her shoulder.

"Good night, Sheila," he said. "Get to bed sharp, both of you. I'll call for you to-morrow."

"We'll be ready early," she answered looking up at him; and he discovered, to his suprise, that her eyes were swimming in tears.

There was a certain monotony about the days of unremitting work that followed; a monotony tinged

with its own peculiar high lights and shadows; with beauty and terror, fortitude and anguish, the incoming and outgoing pulse-beat of life at the Base. Scarcely a day passed without some minor incident, some flash of human revelation that neither Keith nor his orderlies would forget while they lived.

For Helen—with every nerve responsive to the suffering around them—the strain of it all proved no light matter; yet, in retrospect she counted those terrible days as among the richest experiences of her life.

To her it was distracting that wounded men should suffer additional miseries from the fact that even in two and a half months of war it had been impossible to cope with all the complex needs of the situation. Hospitals were few and quite inadequate. The magnificent ambulance trains of later days were still in the workshops at home; while untiring men on the spot did the best they could with the high, comfortless passenger coaches of France. Even the more luxurious sleeping carriages were too cramped for the ingress and egress of badly wounded men: and when, at last, these were landed, like so many bales of goods, on the unsheltered platform of the Gare, shortage of ambulance cars and trained stretcher-bearers added the finishing touch to their nightmare journey. But soon after Keith's arrival the zeal and organisation of the British Red Cross began to make themselves felt, in this respect as in others. Every ambulance that could be raised in London was rushed across to Boulogne; till in a few days there were eighty of one kind or another plying between train and hospital and ship.

For all that, there was still need of superhuman

exertion to cope, even inadequately with the terrible stream of wounded; the back wash as it were, from the Homeric struggle round Ypres. In that region, the Belgians were making their last desperate stand, and war-worn British Divisions,—haggard, sleepless, cruelly depleted—were still miraculously holding their own against Army Corps on Army Corps of fresh German troops heartened by an overwhelming superiority in guns and shells. There—during those awful days—whole battalions of the finest troops on earth practically ceased to exist; and thence came the main influx of comfortless, over-crowded trains.

Steadily the tale of wounded swelled, till it reached an average of two thousand a day. And what were eighty cars among so many? Little better than the five loaves and two small fishes in Galilee: and here was no hope of miraculous intervention. The outstanding miracle of that golden October—when England neither knew her peril nor the full cost of her salvation—was the superhuman fortitude of those that were broken on the wheel and the untiring energy of those who served them in the teeth of baffling conditions.

Day after day the open platform was thronged with men on stretchers in all stages of mental and bodily collapse; British, Indian, French, Belgian, German—brothers all, for the moment, in suffering if in nothing else. Some stared wildly and talked nonsense; some were apathetic; some incurably cheerful; though often their wounds had not been dressed for days.

The lack of trained stretcher-bearers was a serious difficulty till St. John's Ambulance Society came to the

rescue. Porters, willing but unskilful, did what they could. Keith himself, and others like him, helped to carry scores of men. From early morning till near midnight the cars of rescue ran to and fro; but in spite of every effort there were unavoidable delays. Men died there on the stretchers, or in draughty cars, while red-tape regulations kept them waiting outside hospitals and ships. And that cruel strip of *pavé* remained unsmoothed, though Keith had pressed the point with unauthorised persistence. And Helen cursed—so far as her ladyhood permitted—every time they crossed it with patients in the last extremity.

The unceasing rush of work left small leisure for nightmares or even for anxiety; but the strain and pain of it was taxing her nerves to breaking-point. Always, as they drew near the familiar crowded station, there sprang the inevitable question: "Will it be Mark this time?" But though the passing days brought many from his regiment, Mark was not found among them.

As for Sheila, her sensitive spirit felt the test more acutely than either of the elders, who kept watchful eyes on her, were allowed to suspect. Only by clinging desperately to her childhood's code of courage could she save herself, at times, from the ignominy of collapse. It was sustaining, too, to feel that Keith trusted her, that Helen relied on her; and Mark's occasional letters—full of a brotherly tenderness that showed little in his speech—made it seem possible to win through anything without flinching visibly. The fact that she could face this inferno of pain and death and mental anguish without a sense of bitter-

ness or rebellion was more of an asset than she knew. It was, in fact, the keystone of her character, the secret of her spiritual poise. For to accept, actively to accept, spells capacity to transcend; but that she had still to discover.

They had little time, any of them, for abstract or personal thought. The war, and its pressing demands on them constituted their life. Keith had secured a small private sitting-room, where they could enjoy an occasional evening of quiet and rest. But as work was seldom over till near eleven, such oases were rare indeed. At times their heads felt stunned with the eternal rattling to and fro, their hearts numbed by contact with the awful harvest of a modern battlefield. But on the whole they loved their work, and would not have been otherwhere for a kingdom.

They grew skilled in the art of talking the men's minds away from their sufferings: and Sheila—"Mouse" though she was—showed so notable a gift for this form of spiritual healing, that Lady Forsyth finally christened her "Queen of the Poor Things." Some mother-quality in her touch and tone seemed to go straight to their hearts. Men who left the station groaning and clenching their teeth, to keep the curses back, would surprisingly soon be conjured into recounting their adventures, or better still, talking of wives and children at home.

Keith himself confessed that he had never properly appreciated the British Tommy till he carried him wounded; and Helen lost her heart a dozen times over. More than once when they chanced upon men shattered and bandaged past human recognition,

she came very near losing her head: but only once did she disgrace herself by fainting outright.

On that occasion, Keith carried her straight back to their Hotel, laid her on the sofa and stayed by her till she was sufficiently recovered to feel very much ashamed of herself.

"Promise I won't do it again," she assured him as he stood leaning over her.

"No, that you *certainly* won't," he said sternly. "If ever you do, I shall pack you straight off home. To-night, for a punishment, you'll go early to bed. Sheila will be quite safe with me."

Argument and rebellion were useless. Moreover, she was honestly exhausted; and before ten o'clock she was sound asleep.

But even weariness could not break the habit of short rest; and by one of the morning she was amazingly wide awake.

Some distant sound had roused her, and now it drew nearer:—footsteps and voices; men cheering and singing of "La Gloire" and "La Mort." Nearer still they came, tramping along the pavement, till they were almost under her open window.

Then she was aware of a discordant note in that gallant chorus. One voice, raised in terror and remonstrance, was trying to dominate those other voices that were obviously shouting it down.

"J'ai peur! Mon Dieu, camarades, j'ai peur!"

The words reached her distinctly now. But the rest, unheeding, sang louder than ever of "la mort" and "la gloire."

Possibly they were sorry for him. The coward is the unhappiest of men. Yet he too being "enfant

de la patrie" must go, even as others went: and Helen Forsyth, hearing him go, found the tears streaming down her face—not for the coercion of one reluctant citizen, but for the unending horror and misery of it all: the fear and the anguish and the calculated cruelty that were so infinitely worse than death.

Sheila, sleeping the profound sleep of healthily exhausted youth, stirred not an eyelash even when the noise was at its height. But, for Helen, that pitiful interlude had put an end to rest; had opened the door to nightmare memories and her own most private fears.

Since the long letter from Mark, that had greeted her on arrival, there had been one barren field post-card: and even that was ten days old.

And away there, in the trenches, the struggle seemed to wax fiercer every hour. . . .

The blank parallelogram of her window gleamed pale grey before, in spite of herself, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER VI]

"They stand to be her sacrifice,
The sons this Mother flings like dice,
To face the odds and brave the Fates. . . ."

GEORGE MEREDITH.

THE strain of Mark's sudden silence told increasingly upon the three of them. It was tacitly assumed that postal arrangements were disorganised. Each hoped that the others believed in that consoling fiction; but privately, they were sceptics all.

Helen continued to post his paper and her own thick envelope every other day in the hope that he was still to be found somewhere in the terrible maze of trenches that drew England's best and bravest as a magnet draws steel.

Meantime, they were thankful for unremitting work; for the constant movement and interest of life at the Base. Young officers, eager for action, might be bored to extinction by a few weeks in camp or in one of the crowded hotels; but an observer, blessed with humour and a large love of human nature, could not fail to find at every turn food for thought, for laughter and for tears.

War is neither all horror, nor all heroism, or it could not be waged by flesh and blood. Soldiers who can die like gods, or fight as the beasts that perish, are, in the intervals, men of like passions with their

kind. And genuine soldiers were scarce among those who now poured into Boulogne, to fill the gaps in that dangerously thin line round Ypres: Territorials and schoolmasters, clergymen and clerks, lords of commerce and lords of the land; dissimilar in almost every essential, yet welded together by one common resolve, one common faith:—a crusade indeed!

And the manifold needs of a host undreamed of by the wildest, wickedest "militarists," demanded the existence of that other army chiefly congregated at the Base;—doctors, nurses, chaplains, ambulance folk, owners of private cars, and those sorrowful birds of passage—relations of dying or dangerously wounded men. On the quays, in streets and hotels they thronged, those incongruous fragments of the world's greatest drama; and Lady Forsyth never tired of watching them or listening to their snatches of talk. Neither weariness, nor nightmare visions, nor anxiety, even, could blunt the edge of her keen interest in the human panorama.

"Oh, Sheila, my lamb," she exclaimed one evening after a day of very varied emotions, "aren't people—all sorts and kinds of them—passionately interesting? Even when I'm laid on the uttermost shelf, I shall still be always peeping over the edge!"

"And you'll always find *me* peeping up at you!" the girl answered, smiling at the quaint conceit. "It's simply wonderful, being with you—through all this!"

A temporary lull in the stream of wounded was followed, too soon, by a renewed rush of hospital trains filled to overflowing; the harvest of a fresh German

onslaught. But by this time there were more cars and more stretcher-bearers. Ambulance trains, splendidly equipped, were being hurried out from England; and the customs sheds at the station had become a great shelter, roughly partitioned into dressing-stations for those who had need of immediate care. From this seed of voluntary effort there sprung up, in time, a big stationary hospital, but by then the Forsyth-Macnair car was needed elsewhere.

Meantime, in every effort to minimise the sufferings of the men he served, Keith was actively to the fore. He even talked of running a second car. Helen herself was amazed at his energy and versatility—he whom she had hitherto regarded as a man wedded entirely to books and thought. But among all the surprises of a war rich in surprise, good and evil, were none more remarkable than such unlooked-for revelations of human capacity and character.

Still no sign of Mark, though there were many discoveries, sad and glad, on that ever-crowded platform: and one morning, on a day they did not soon forget, Sheila made a find on her own account that concerned them all more nearly than they knew.

It was a brilliant morning. Scarcely a cloud in the sky or a ripple on the sea; and they reached the station early to find a train had arrived before daylight. Stretcher cases had been left undisturbed; but those who could walk were strolling or limping up and down in the sun. Others, more seriously damaged, lay about in groups on the ground or propped against bales of goods; great gaunt Highlanders, Gunners and Guardsmen, Indians and Canadians—their coats, boots, and puttees caked with the mud of Flanders;

heads and limbs swathed in bandages bright with blood; rough jokes on their lips; a ready gleam of laughter in their tired eyes. And the sun beat down upon them all; and the last of the flies gave them no peace.

It was a sight to contract the heart in pity and to lift it in pride of common human manhood that could so smilingly suffer and endure.

There must have been seven hundred of them, all told. To dress their wounds and remove them would be an arduous day's work; and only by very special efforts could they be fed. Red Cross and V. A. D. ladies hurried to and fro with food and hot drinks and words of welcome, hardly less acceptable.

Keith went off, at once, to help with the stretchers; and for a space the three were separated. Helen promptly attached herself to a Highlander whose face was obliterated in bandages, save for his mouth and one eye: and very soon Sheila came hurrying up to them, two spots of colour in her pale cheeks.

"Mums, *who* d'you think I've found?—No, not Mark," she added quickly. "It's my very 'poor thing,' Mr. Seldon, of all people on earth. I knew he'd taken up motor cycling keenly; but I didn't dream he'd volunteer for despatch riding. Just shows you can never label people off-hand. It seems he had furlough due and wanted to be useful; so he's been running to and fro, in this awful fighting, and had his right leg smashed for a reward. When your Kiltie's had his breakfast, do come and be introduced."

The Kiltie's one eye beamed at the familiar allusion from so engaging a morsel of girlhood; and he nearly

choked himself in a gallant effort to empty his steaming cup of coffee at a gulp. But Sheila noticed nothing. She was engrossed in her regenerate "poor thing": rather more so than Lady Forsyth quite approved.

She, herself, found him not unattractive; dark as a gypsy, with thoughtful eyes that followed Sheila wherever she moved.

"That *you* should have found me! The most amazing luck!" he kept repeating, at intervals, apparently taking it for granted that Lady Forsyth understood the situation.

And, indeed, Helen caught herself wondering was it out of pure consideration for him that the girl chiefly confined her ministrations to men in his neighbourhood? She even came back to ask for details of the culminating adventure that had possibly cost him a leg.

"There's just a shred of hope they may save it," he added philosophically. "And I'm hanging on to that. Anyway it's not likely now, I'd be quarrelling with my fate! I told you I was coming over. Didn't you get my letter?"

"No. It'll probably follow me here. Now—I musn't stay talking. Shall I ask Mr. Macnair to get you for our car?"

"Do; angel of mercy!"

Snatches, in this vein, Helen overheard as she came and went upon her own errands and her swift brain sprang half-way to meet possible developments not entirely to her liking. Still—she was sorry for the man and glad when Keith secured him as a passenger.

They left him finally at the hospital where Mona was beginning to earn distinction; and Sheila promised

to look him up later. Then back they rattled again to that eternally familiar Gare.

This time they lighted on Maurice Lenox—not wounded, but shivering with fever, his nerves all ajar from sleeplessness and shell fire. The hope that he might give them news of Mark was soon extinguished. Maurice had run across him earlier in the day, and had since heard great things of his capacity and courage; but where the regiment was at present he had not the ghost of an idea.

Maurice himself was a rather damaged edition of the lively clever boy they had known at Inveraig. He declared that the horrors of war "made in Germany" exceeded the wildest cinematographs in his brain. He had only been "forward" three times for training purposes; but every time "the luck" had been against him. He thanked his stars he had got out of it alive; and had not the remotest desire to go back.

After her talk with him, Helen wilted visibly; and by the end of their strenuous morning she looked so white and strained that Keith prescribed an afternoon of complete rest. The station work was too urgent for Sheila and himself to cry off altogether; but they would come back early and cheer her loneliness.

Helen accepted her fate the more readily because, from the moment of waking, her spirit had been shadowed by a too-familiar sensation. Some large event was hovering near. For this reason she felt reluctant to leave the Hotel; and when the waiter brought in her tea-tray with two envelopes on it, she did not even need to look at the writing. Her instincts—as Mark had once said—were infallible.

The second letter was from his Colonel; but that could wait.

Page on close written page she scanned, while absently sipping her tea; till her heart brimmed over afresh with love and pride; and gratitude that, in spite of all, she had him still. She could not help contrasting the tone of his letter with the talk of Maurice that morning. No insistence, here, on horrors, or on hell fire; no easy optimism, either, as regards the gigantic task in hand.

"Every day makes it clearer," he wrote, "that we've a thundering hard job before us and that our line round here is dangerously thin. Officers and men are about equally exhausted by the long strain and insufficient reliefs; and enemy movements all suggest that they're cheerfully reckoning to extinguish us in time for Christmas in Town. Bless their innocent hearts! They've yet to reckon with Tommy's talent for hanging on with his back teeth, even when a good few of them have been extracted!

"Mums, he's simply a human miracle; and we're all head over ears in pride of him, though we don't let on to any great extent. We've had a welcome breather in billets the last three days. But there are big doings on; and I expect we'll soon go forward again. Look out for a field PC and be of good heart till you get one. 'Who dies if England lives? That's the only sane way to look at it.

"Just had three ripping letters from you and Sheila and Bel. It does a man's heart good, in the midst of all this, to get such delicious whiffs of home. You *sound* a shade anxious. But fretting's waste of strength, little Mums, and your Highland laddie's

going strong. The C. O.'s a mighty man of valour. Talks of making me Adjutant when Collins takes up his staff job; all for love of you, I'll swear! And—talking of love, I've one word for your very private ear. If old Keith should suddenly startle you by an offer of marriage, don't say 'No' if you can help it. Mind, I'm not sure if he will. But I've reason to suppose he may. What matter, after all, the difference in years—you that, at fifty, can still behave like a child of ten!"

Helen read and re-read those amazing words in a very mixed frame of mind. An offer of marriage—! Mark's imagination was running away with him. More than once of late she had wondered if Keith cared for Sheila. But herself—! Impossible. Undeniably it warmed her heart, true lover of love that she was: yet Keith was right. She could still, at times, feel that Other so near her, in spirit, as to make the idea of a second husband seem little short of sacrilege.

Dropping Mark's letter in her lap, she covered her face. "Richard—Richard!" she whispered, and yielded herself to the vague yet intimate sense of his presence, that gradually enfolded her and as gradually faded, leaving her doubly alone.

By way of banishing ghosts she opened the Colonel's letter and read, with uplifted heart, his sincere and soldierly praise of her son whom he hoped very soon to secure for his Adjutant. The first moment it was possible, he added, Mark should have a few days' leave. No man in the battalion had earned a better right to it. Moreover, in the recent fighting, he had shown such conspicuous gallantry that his name was to be sent up for a decoration.

Such news made royal atonement for anxiety; and she was still reading when there came a knock at the door.

"Entrez!" she said casually, supposing the man had come for her tea-things. Then she found that he was holding a salver towards her; and on the salver lay a telegram.

At sight of it all the wheels of her being stopped dead. Everything seemed slipping away from her. Mechanically, she took the envelope and rose to her feet.

The waiter, too often a messenger of sorrow, vanished swiftly: and Helen Forsyth stood alone reading, with dazed iteration, the bald announcement that the War Office regretted to report her son Lieutenant Sir Mark Stuart Forsyth "Wounded and Missing, believed killed."

Her immobility was the measure of her anguish; and the shock was the greater coming at a moment when his voice had almost sounded in her ears.

Still mechanically, she picked up that precious letter and, for the first time, looked at the date. It was a week old.

Life without Mark——!

She pressed a hand across her tearless eyes: and while she stood so, the door opened again. She started violently. A crazy hope of reprieve flashed through her brain. But it was only Keith.

The paper she held and the look in her eyes enlightened him: and before he could master his voice, she had recovered hers.

"Keith—it's *come!*" she cried holding out the telegram. "God help us!"

A sudden faintness overwhelmed her, and she put both hands to her head. Keith saw her sway just perceptibly; and without an instant's hesitation he put an arm round her shoulders.

"Helen—my dear," was all he could say, as she leaned limply against him, shaken with sharp, tearless sobs.

Once, in despair at the sheer impotence of speech, he laid his hand on her head; a moment—no more. Then very gently he led her to the sofa, and she lay there, her rebel spirit broken by this last and cruelest blow.

He picked up the telegram; re-read it, and put it on the mantelpiece. Its work was not yet done. The news would hit Sheila hard. And Miss Alison. Had Helen thought of that?

She was thinking of it now.

"Keith," she sat upright, her eyes tearless still. "I've just remembered—poor Bel! Shall we wire or write?"

"A letter would be more merciful," he said.

"Very well. I don't know how to write it. But I'll try." She sat silent, gazing at a photograph of Mark in uniform. Then: "Keith—he *is alive.* I am sure of it," she said slowly in a voice of impressive quietness and conviction. "While I was lying there something—Someone told me. If he were not, he would have come to me, as Derek came. With all three of them, I had the warning. So, unless he does come, I shall cling to my conviction."

"Yes:—cling to it," he said. "You've always seen true. Meantime, I'll take the car to the Front and not cease from searching, till I find him or some trace of him. You two must go home at once."

"*Home*—?" She shivered.

"Have faith—and patience," he said gently. "Throw all your energy into some sort of work less painful than the work here."

"But Sheila will hate leaving it. Her whole heart is given to the wounded."

"A very large part of it is given to you. And now—you are one of them; one of the wounded in spirit, whose names appear in no casualty lists."

At last, to his relief, he saw tears in her eyes. She brushed them away and rose to her feet.

"I must try and write to Bel. And oh—there were letters from him and the Colonel. You must read them——"

Suddenly she remembered—and went hot all over at thought of how he had held her while she was immersed in grief. Dexterously abstracting Mark's last sheet, she handed him the rest and went back to the escritoire.

For a while Keith sat watching her, love and pain and pity contending in his heart. Then he opened the letters. It was the first time she had given him one of Mark's to read.

Hers to Bel scarcely filled a sheet. But it took a long time to write; and before it was finished, Sheila came in, visibly refreshed by an hour's talk with Mona and Seldon, who was not to lose his leg.

Hearing her step, Lady Forsyth put down her pen and covered her face.

Keith, feeling like an executioner, again took up the telegram that was propped against a vase; and involuntarily Sheila put up a hand as if he had struck her.

"So soon?" she breathed, looking beyond him at Helen's bowed head.

"Not the worst—yet," Keith answered handing her the paper.

She took in the contents at a glance; and for a long minute she stood gazing at it; lifeless as a statue; white to the lips, their first tremor resolutely stilled.

Presently she came back, as it were, from a long way off. "We can still hope—and pray," she said just above her breath.

Then, turning from him, she hurried over to Helen; and Keith went out, leaving them together——

Next morning there were hasty preparations to catch the midday boat. Keith's idea had been to cross with them and see them safe on English ground: but in the end there was no resisting Helen's urgent plea that he would not waste so many precious hours on them.

She promised him a telegram from Dover, and another from Wynchcombe Friars. Then, Helen-like, when it came to the actual pang of parting, she impulsively clutched his arm.

"Oh—*take care* of yourself," she said with smothered intensity. "Both of you gone: and we alone—waiting——"

"For the fulfilment of your conviction," he reminded her. "Be sure *I* shall not rest till I have found him."

"Do you suppose I doubt that?" she asked, a new tenderness in her eyes.

But even to him she could not speak her inmost fear—"What if Mark were wounded and in German hands?"

CHAPTER VII

"Your hearts are lifted up; your hearts
That have foreknown the utter price;
Your hearts burn upward, as a flame
Of splendour and of sacrifice,"
To Women—LAWRENCE BINYON.

WYNCHCOMBE FRIARS again—with the spirit of Mark haunting them in every room and at every turn of the grounds. Most intolerable were the little intimate things that conjured up his presence, the very tone of his voice: and—to crown all, there was Bobs. His ecstatic greeting, the sobbing squeals of joy that Mark so loved to hear; his rush beyond them, obviously in search of his master; shook the foundations of their fortitude. Not until now did Helen discover how much virtue had gone out of her: and the reaction, while it lasted, was a nightmare of which she afterwards felt heartily ashamed.

Sheila, thankful to be alone with her at such a time, quietly took the reins of government into her small, capable hands. On the day after their arrival she put Lady Forsyth to bed and practically kept her there for a week, soothing and stimulating, with massage, the nerves of her head and her spirit.

She had the peculiar love of the born healer for all things hurt or unhappy; and the reserve force in her, detected by Keith, had kept the poise of her spirit

unshaken through all. But the hovering shadow of a smile no longer haunted her lips. She had learnt, by aspiration rather than petition, to draw freely upon the one unlimited Source of Strength; and young as she was, the older woman grew to rely upon her utterly during those days when the light within her was darkness.

Mercifully they found no strangers in the house; and Sir Richard's sisters promptly discovered plausible excuses for going home. Helen was evidently in good hands; and in no mood for any other company. So for a while they two had their shrine of sacred memories to themselves; and Lady Forsyth who had supposed she knew her Sheila through and through, began to feel as if she had never really known her—till now. Such still, strong natures are slow studies always. In the ordinary way of life, they seldom sparkle or allure. It needs the high demand to call forth the hidden elements that make them the salt of the earth. And now, in response to that high demand, the true Sheila shone out like a star in darkness.

Alone with her and the healing influences of home, Helen's courage revived apace; and with it her natural tendency to merge the personal in the larger view.

All over England, all over Europe, suspense or suffering, in some form, had become a paramount law of life. It was the price of patriotism. Men paid it with their blood and their mutilated bodies: women with their tears and mutilated lives. One in suffering, they had the more need, all of them, to be one in courage. And Mark himself had willed to give everything, without reserve, without regret. Bitter repining on her part were simple disloyalty to

him: and there remained the saving mercy that her sorrow was tinged with hope.

There came a morning when she felt able to speak of these things to Sheila; even to tell her in detail of that talk in her turret-room; and their tacit, mutual resolve not to fail him in this last and hardest test of loyalty linked them closer than ever——

So far no word from Bel; and Lady Forsyth felt anxious, a little. Deep and real fellow-feeling had wakened her first genuine impulse of affection towards the girl. She had written almost as to a daughter. And on this very morning of her talk with Sheila, Bel's answer came:—heart-broken, purged of affectation, yet emphasising, in every line, her complete divergence of feeling and point of view.

"You will wonder, dear, why I haven't written sooner, but I'm an arrant coward inside, and I simply couldn't face putting the cold truth on paper. Your sweet letter, written while the shock was fresh upon you, was a heroic thing. One sees where Mark got his courage. If he'd only had a little less of it—he might be with us still. You will disapprove of that 'If.' But I'm too utterly crushed to invent correct sentiments. I can only put my own down anyhow, even if they're all wrong. Sweet of you to tell me of your private conviction. I hope to Heaven it may be true: but I have no sustaining faith to keep me going. Myself, I had a horrid feeling, that last night, that it was—the end. It's dear of you to say I can come when I like. But just now, having to work keeps one from collapse and I am sure you two are happier together. Later on—perhaps. Harry is an angel to

me. But I'm not pleasant company these days. Nothing interests me now and I hate this abominable war worse than ever. If you hear any news, please wire. I got a letter from him—after yours. And it smashed me up. That's partly why I didn't write. Love to you and Sheila

from your desperately unhappy,
BEL."

Lady Forsyth handed the letter to Sheila. It was blotted at the end, where tears had dropped.

"Poor child! She cares more than I gave her credit for.—I wonder," she added, half to herself, "what he would think of that letter?"

Sheila bit her lip and was silent, and they fell to discussing Lady Forsyth's latest scheme—country Cottage Homes for Children Orphaned by the War.

That morning proved a turning-point in their new, shadowed life. On all sides there was work crying out to be done. They had no right any longer to shut themselves up with their sorrow.

"If we believe he will come back, we must live up to our faith," Lady Forsyth said simply: and they did so, to the best of their power. Keith wrote every few days, just to keep in touch with them and report his movements. There was nothing else to report—as yet.

Among countless notes of sympathy and hope, and of admiration for Mark was none more uplifting to the mother's heart than the sincere and simple tribute of Colonel Munro.

"To the Regiment and to me personally," he

wrote, "the loss is so great that although the worst is reported, we cannot give up hope. Neither will you, I feel sure, for many weeks to come. Forsyth's presence among us was an inspiration. It is not often in these dead-level days that one meets with a man who seems a natural-born king. Without exaggeration, that was how we felt about him. Unfortunately, those of his company who were with him last are also missing; but I feel convinced we shall hear of them all yet. I have named and described the men to Mr. Macnair, who writes that he is instituting a search on his own account. Good luck to him: and to you—the very best that heart can wish. Yours ever,

R. MUNRO."

Sheila shared that letter, and every other, even as she shared the difficult task of answering them all. In this respect, at least, she was grateful to Bel who had tacitly relinquished the sad, high privilege that was hers by right.

The cottage scheme involved much correspondence and occasional journeys to London: and it was then that they began to realise more acutely the contrast between the "War drama" as visualised by an island people, and the stern, yet stimulating actuality, just across the Channel.

There, even at the Base, the atmosphere was electrical with the spirit of the Front, with the enthusiasm and passion of a great imaginative race, for whom invasion was no "bogey" but a bloody and devastating fact. Here, the great unseen thing was frankly a sensation fitfully discerned through the fog of censored despatches; analysed, with bewildering

brilliance, by literary strategists; and distorted by visionaries, who extolled "the war against War," and feverishly planned a new heaven on earth.

Happily for them, the real issues hung upon the vigil and the valour of a negligible minority who were only concerned to beat the Germans, and to make good, with their lives, the State's miscalculations and delays.

But the very advantages of the islander are a part of his many disabilities. Not only did realisation come slowly to England: but it came too often in the wrong guise. In London, the newspaper craze became a form of dram-drinking. Everything that could be said about the great obsession was repeated over and over, in every conceivable tone of voice: till a bewildered public began to wonder whether politicians believed in their high-sounding generalities or journalists in their inspired leaders.

Though social life had practically ceased, the pavements of the City were still thronged with men of military age, quite convinced, by the tone of certain journals, that their services were not urgently needed elsewhere; that the War would probably be over by Christmas; certainly by Easter. And, after all, were they not doing good work, necessary work, on the spot?

Lady Forsyth herself had reason to feel grateful, often, for the steadying effect of contact with the real thing—even the fringe of it: and her native sensibility to atmosphere made her feel, more keenly than most, the clash of contrast between the often unwholesome ferment of London and the immovable phlegm of the countryside. Coming home, tired in

body and spirit, after a long day's work in Town, she would be beset by distracting doubts as to how this great and casual country of hers would emerge from the searching test of war.

It was then that Sheila, quick to read her mood, would slip behind her, unloose her hair, and with skilful finger-tips, magically pluck out weariness and doubts alike, till Lady Forsyth would catch at her hands and kiss them.

"Sheila, that's not mere massage. You seem to reach one's very soul."

And the girl stood smiling down upon her like a young goddess radiant with conscious power.

"That's because I'm loving you hard all the time," she said. "It's a heavenly gift. I used to feel—such a dumb thing. Now I can give it all out through my fingers, I feel free. And—Dearest," she added gravely, "you mustn't get disheartened because London, on the surface, seems unspeakable. The unspeakables are always on the surface. Underneath, there are hundreds of real workers and silent sufferers, doing and bearing things without trumpets or banners. And aren't our sailors and soldiers miracles to praise God for? Surely such leaven as that must end in leavening the whole lump——"

"*You're* a miracle to praise God for," Lady Forsyth began; but her lip trembled and she was silent.

Then Sheila, in her protecting mother-fashion, drew the older woman's head close to her breast. "Nearly three weeks now," she whispered. "We *must* hear something soon."

Lady Forsyth shivered; but Sheila went resolutely on: "London wears you out, Mums, body and soul.

Let's give it up for a little. There's plenty of work on the spot. It will hearten up Mark's people to see more of you. They must be anxious too, in their own way."

They were: and it was the very reflection of her own anxiety, the hovering question on every face, that at first made this paramount duty a very real ordeal. But it was Mark's work; and his mother found it by no means devoid of compensation. It drew them all closer together; it threw fresh light on Mark's individual fashion of upholding the aristocratic ideal among a free people; and it steadily strengthened her own conviction that there, where human nature is still untainted by industrialism, lies the true hope of England's future. She was sustained, also, by a private resolve that when Mark returned he should find, within the boundaries of his own kingdom, a right spirit towards the War.

Very soon she discovered an ally of equal enthusiasm and wider experience—Dr. Warburton, Headmaster of High Rough School. He had lost no time in getting to the Front, as Chaplain of the Forces, leaving High Rough in charge of Rex Maitland, to that gentleman's undisguised satisfaction. Already the fatal word "indispensable" had become a mark of distinction more coveted in some quarters than a decoration. Warburton, at home for the moment, on business connected with the school, spent most of his spare time trying to instil the spirit of the trenches into cottages and country shops, where impassioned leaders were dismissed as "hot air" and despatches full of foreign names were only half understood.

As an old friend of the family, he had been among

the first admitted to see Helen, on her return from abroad: and the day after her talk with Sheila, he turned up at tea-time in the private hope that he might glean news of Mark.

His leonine head with its shock of grizzled hair, hawk's eyes under shaggy brows, and a Homeric laugh, gave a general impression of bigness, belied by his mere inches: but the man's inner stature corresponded unmistakably with the laugh and the lion's head.

Within a week, now, he would be back in France. "And high time, too," he added, thoughtfully sipping his tea. "I'll miss coming here. Otherwise—" he shot out his great moustache—"It's healthier at the Front in spite of the shells. The real spirit of England is in the trenches and on the sea."

As he spoke the door opened and a parlour-maid brought in the afternoon post.

"Ah—Keith," Lady Forsyth murmured, seizing a thin unstamped envelope and letting the rest fall into her lap.

Warburton rose, as if to put down his cup, and strolled across to the window. Presently a small sound of relief reached him and he turned quickly about. "Found him, have they?"

"Not yet," Helen answered with a brave smile. "But the Sergeant, who was wounded trying to help him, has made his way back to the Regiment after hair-breadth adventures. They're sending him home at once, Keith says. He has my address. He will write. Then I can go and see him." She spoke in short swift sentences, holding emotion in leash. Sheila had risen and was standing near the fire, ostensibly

warming her hands. "He and another soldier managed to drag Mark to a farm. He was hit in the head. Unconscious. They could do no more. The Germans began shelling the place: and there they had to leave him with kind French people. They weren't even sure—if he was alive. That's all—so far." She tried to smile. "It doesn't lift the fog much, does it? But still, just to see this man who was with him——"

"Yes—yes," Warburton's regard held more of admiration than of pity. "Let me go with you—if the call comes in time," he added, and rather abruptly took his leave.

That night Lady Forsyth wrote to Bel. "Come to me for the week-end, dear," she added, "if you feel you can now, and would care to hear in detail what little I may have to tell. With any luck I ought to see Sergeant Macgregor before Saturday."

And in a very few days the summons came. It was from Aldershot; and Sheila decided to go with them. While they interviewed Macgregor she would love to make a round of the wards. For, in secret, she missed her "poor things" and the work at Boulogne.

It was hard not to hope for impossibilities; but the Sergeant's rather disjointed tale served neither to justify Helen's obstinate conviction, nor to dispel her secret fears. He was a red-headed man, square and sturdy, just able to hobble. His nerves were obviously shaken by all he had been through; and his emotion in speaking of that particular day made it the harder to restrain her own. Of the nature of Mark's wound he could tell her nothing except that there was blood all over his head and that they had

bandaged it roughly—he and a British Tommy, who contributed his own mud-stained puttee, worn for weeks.

The mother winced at that. "Did he know you?" she asked quickly hoping he had not seen.

"Ah canna rightly tell, ma leddy," was the unsatisfactory reply. "Ah kneeled in the mud and ah said: 'Ye ken verra weel who I am, sir?' An' he smiled crooked-like an' pit up his hand to stroke me cheek like a bairn. An' there came a sound in his thrapple. But niver a word. The Lord shield him from the hands o' they Jairman blayguards."

But Helen knew, now, that the tide of war had rolled over the village where they had left her son: and for the moment hope and courage were dead within her.

Warburton left for France next day, having promised to look up Keith: and Bel arrived with Harry to stay over Sunday. Lady Forsyth had smiled, not without understanding, at her request that Harry might "come too." Even in her sorrow Bel was still a victim to fear of being bored: and Harry's masculine attitude of worship and service was more of an asset than she knew.

Lady Forsyth discovered many fresh points in common with Harry; but the change in Bel, obvious to both, troubled her beyond measure. Not merely was her smiling serenity subdued by grief: but it seemed overlaid with a fine film of hardness from which things painful or emotional glanced off like arrows from a surface of steel. She would neither look at the papers, nor talk of the war. This fact alone made

conversation difficult; but for Helen this stumbling-block was as nothing to its inner significance. The strain and pain of war, that was steadily softening and enlarging Sheila, appeared to be having the opposite effect on Bel. Deliberately she turned her eyes away from beholding the world's anguish and heroism: deliberately she hardened her heart against its effect upon herself; so that she seemed in danger of losing even the surface softness that had been no small part of her charm.

Plainly, her love for Mark, however sincere, had no alchemic power to transmute the dross in her to gold. Would his return, such as he was now, dissolve that film of hardness? Or was the girl laying up further tragedy for herself and others?

Alone with Lady Forsyth, Bel was gentle and affectionate, yet completely aloof. She listened to Macgregor's story with set lips and a fine line between her brows. Though the mother's voice shook and tears threatened, Bel's eyes were dry.

"And after that—you can *still* manage to hope?" was all she said.

"Dear, it is not so much hope with me, as—belief," Lady Forsyth answered gently, and Bel's sigh had a faint note of exasperation.

"You are amazing," she said. "And—so like him." Then with a swift dramatic gesture, she rose and seemed to fling away her mantle of composure. "Oh, this brutal, senseless war!" she cried, her eyes still hard, her low voice tense with feeling. "A man like that—splendid, strong, gifted—smashed up like a bit of matchboard. And what earthly use has it been to any one—his sacrifice or our pain?"

The older woman listened to that strange outburst with something very like relief. It proved that Bel was not hard all through and it cried aloud the very thoughts that had visited her own heart in the small hours when all the wheels run low.

"Bel—Bel!" she remonstrated gently, "that is *the* question one dare not ask. It's hard not to. No one knows that better than I do. But the answer is, if Mark, and others of his quality, had taken that point of view, where would England be now?"

"Oh England!" She dismissed her country with a faint shrug. "Mark would be here with us, safe and whole. That's all I know—or care."

Her voice still had its low bitterness; but it shook a little now and going over to the window she sat awhile looking out upon the wood and the terrace where she had walked with him in that other life, gone beyond recall.

Vaguely she heard the door open. Then a low sound from Lady Forsyth made her look round sharply. Helen had risen—her lips were set and pale.

Bel glanced at the open letter she held out to her. It was a formal intimation, garnished with formal regret, that Lieutenant Sir Mark Forsyth, formerly reported missing, in November, was now officially reported killed. The scanty information received in the past three weeks gave no grounds for supposing otherwise.

"Of course this was bound to come," Helen said mechanically.

But Bel pushed aside the paper and covered her face.

Helen stood silent a moment; then she found courage to repeat her own conviction.

"Dear, they may report what they please. Mark *is* alive. I know it."

Bel simply shook her head.

"You don't believe me?"

"No."

"But—you won't go into mourning. Bel, you mustn't."

"No—no. I detest mourning."

The muffled voice broke suddenly. Lady Forsyth put an arm round the girl's shoulders and Bel leaned against her sobbing like a child. Then, with a shivering sigh, she released herself and hurried out of the room.

Lady Forsyth picked up that hateful slip of paper and dropped it into the fire. Mark was alive:—nothing could shake her belief in that. But he was wounded—and in German hands. Her inmost fear had come true.

BOOK III

VIA CRUCIS

CHAPTER I

"Love is swift of foot,
Love's a man of war,
And can hit and can shoot
From far."

GEORGE HERBERT.

IT was on the first of December that Sir Mark Forsyth was officially reported killed; and it was upon an evening of early November, on a battle-scarred road of Northern France, that a certain waggon-load of dead and wounded men jolted leisurely towards a certain village lately recaptured by the Prussians. The open body of the cart was spacious and full of straw that had once been tolerably clean, but was now defiled with mud and blood. It held six men—two French, three British, and one German. Two of them were obviously dead, three were as obviously alive and in cruel pain. The sixth, who wore a kilt and a blood-stained puttee wound about his head, lay on his back, motionless, wide-eyed, watching a bank of grey cloud dissolve into shredded wisps of gold. Presently the sun broke through and smiled upon the aftermath of battle as upon the sheaves of some peaceful harvest garnered with thanks and praise.

In this unceremonious fashion was Mark removed from the farm where Macgregor had been forced to

leave him—dead, to all appearance, or at the point of death.

Of how he came to be there, in such woeful company, he knew nothing. His brain seemed blurred and curiously inert. He felt no pain, only a horrid faintness; utter exhaustion from loss of blood. He would have given the world for a sip of brandy. Where was his flask? he wondered vaguely, but felt too weak to stir a finger.

Above him, beside the driver, sat a little French doctor, talking and gesticulating vehemently. He might be of use, Mark reflected with feeble impatience, if one could only attract his attention.

Summoning all his ebbing strength, he tried to shout. The sole result was a horrid choking sensation and an abortive noise in his throat.

He grew suddenly alarmed. What did it mean? And where were they going? Had he, possibly, been taken prisoner in spite of himself?

There was none to enlighten him, even could he have spoken; and the torment of uncertainty remained. The fact that he suffered no physical pain was a minor item to be thankful for. Not altogether a minor item, perhaps, judging from sounds emitted by the German at the far end of the cart. Between groans and broken curses he was calling impartially on God and his mother.

The last galvanised Mark's brain into momentary life. What of his own mother—and Bel? Would they believe him killed? How long was it since his clock of time had stopped dead? Would it ever be set going again? And—what of the fight?

More questions—nothing but questions—unan-

swered and unanswerable. They buzzed about him like hornets; and to be rid of them he fell back on memory. He recalled a world that rained shells and shrapnel—a violent, friendly and increasingly muddy world, in which Allies and enemies were wildly intermingled, till it was cleft from end to end by long and opposing lines of trenches, with a No Man's Land of varying width between. In the No Man's Land things had happened: things that left a scar on the memory—things a man could not talk about and, most unhappily, could not forget. In those early days reliefs were few and infrequent; and Mark looked back on trench life as an endless age of strain—nerve and body and imaginative brain racked to the limit of endurance, and under all a dogged resolve that there should be no limit of endurance but the arbitrary limit of death.

Too vividly he remembered those last days, when grey-green battalions had been hurled against them, wave on wave, till his Highlanders, who stood like rocks in a storm, had been forced to retire by an urgent order from those who alone knew when wisdom demanded sacrifice of ground rather than of men. Stubbornly, foot by foot, they had fallen back from their hard-won position. Then—consternation . . . and confusion. The battalion on their right seemed to have melted away.

But the enemy allowed them no breathing space for dismay. They were in dire peril: and Mark lost not a moment in rallying his men for a final desperate stand. . . . Suddenly, in the midst of it, when the struggle was fiercest, the earth had seemed to collapse under him. He recalled a horrid

sensation of falling backwards, headlong—into nothingness.

At that point his memory broke off short. The rest was a meaningless jumble of sights and sensations like a troubled dream.

He was lying in a turnip-field. Something had happened to his head. Blood was flowing freely, but he felt no pain. In vain he tried to move. Weakness flowed over him. Living and conscious, he lay there among the dead, listening to the roar of battle that rolled steadily farther away; fearful exceedingly lest they should bury or burn him; or, finding him alive, should take him prisoner while this ignominious helplessness hung like lead upon his limbs.

At times he could hear voices and men passing. But very soon darkness fell again; and out of the darkness came a vision of Macgregor's face. He remembered trying to speak, and the feel of the man's rough cheek when he patted it in sign of recognition. To his intense relief, he had felt them trying to move him. What had come of it? Where were they now?

The questions were at him afresh and the haunting thought of his mother. Once more he summoned all his strength in an effort to reach her mentally. He had succeeded in doing so on more than one occasion. But now, the attempt was lunacy. It simply exhausted his last remnant of strength, and once more he slipped back into the outer dark. . . .

By some miracle, his resolute spirit hung on to the thread of life that remained; and when next it struggled up from the bottomless pit, the cart and the jolting

and the smell of blood had vanished like all the other dreams. He was lying on a bed. He could feel the blanket against his chin. The air he breathed was faintly impregnated with antiseptics and the scent of clean straw.

As his brain cleared, he heard women's voices murmuring rhythmically in a foreign tongue. Too weak and weary to stir, he lay awhile steeped in contentment, till that rhythmical murmur resolved itself into Latin prayers. French nuns, good souls, must be praying by his bed.

Next moment, the chill trickle of water on his face made him start and open his eyes. One of the nuns was bending over him.

"Our Lady be praised," she said softly. "The spirit has returned. Monsieur will drink this, and strength will also return."

She held a cup to his lips; warm milk dashed with brandy—pure nectar! It seemed to set life stirring in his veins, even as the woman's face set some vague memory stirring in his mind. The breadth of brow and cheek-bones, the mouth, with its resolute softness and the deep dent above the chin, struck a note of dim familiarity; but he felt far too lazy and comfortable to search for a clue.

The barn-like room in which he found himself was no hospital, but a rough makeshift. There were but half a dozen beds like his own. The remaining sufferers lay on straw pallets; and the little French doctor, whose profile he recognised, appeared to be in charge. That fact, and the presence of nuns made him hopeful of being in the right hands. If only he could ask! But the curse of dumbness was on him

still; and a fear that it might be permanent chilled the flow of returning life.

The other nuns had risen and moved away. She whom they called Sœur Colette stood smiling down on him.

"Ça va bien," she said. "Monsieur comprend?"

He made a sign of assent, then with his left hand and eyebrow, tried to convey the question he could not ask. Her face lit up.

"Le bon Dieu soit bénit. Monsieur desires a little conversation. As much as one can, I will relate."

Serene and smiling, she sat beside him on a low stool. It was purely refreshing to hear a woman's voice again.

"M. le docteur," she told him, "a saint of God with a rough tongue, gathered up many dead and wounded from the terrible battle, more than a week ago, and brought them here to the Red Cross Hospital, then in the hands of my people. Now—Mary Mother, pity us!—it is once more taken by the Prussians. The hospital is seized for themselves, and M. le docteur is graciously permitted to use this ruined farm. Those, alas, who recover become prisoners of war. Monsieur himself on arriving was as one dead; and, next evening, we of the Sisterhood must pray for the souls of the departed. But I, who came to kneel near Monsieur, said: 'This, surely, is not death.' While others summoned M. le docteur, myself I found, by the mercy of God, one pulse, so small, so feeble, there in the neck of Monsieur. Imaginez!"

Mark smiled his crooked smile and lifted his eyebrows. He found it hard to believe in her fairy tale. But, if it were true, this woman, with the

beautiful familiar face, had evidently been his good angel.

She was explaining to him now the nature of his wound, and how splinters of bone pressing on the brain made him powerless to speak or move. These the little doctor had partially lifted. But the complete operation was a delicate one; and he would prefer to wait awhile, in hopes that the tide of battle should roll eastward again.

"It might be well for Monsieur, then, to seem as one dead," Sœur Colette explained, with a flicker of humour in her great dark eyes. "They would not think him worth the trouble to remove; and in Paris all is possible."

Mark had need of the utmost consolation he could extract from that thought. For, as strength returned, impatience returned also, and his imprisoned spirit girded at the hampering hulk of a body over which it had lost command—for how long?

Questions again! He grew to hate them heartily. Wherever he turned for relief, there one or more would spring up to confound him; and at moments of supreme exasperation, his brain seemed alive with notes of interrogation, seeking answers and finding none. More than once he vowed mentally that if he regained the power of speech, he would never again ask a question while he lived.

And he suffered more than exasperation during those interminable November days. The very inactivity of his body seemed to induce a restless activity of mind. Fleeting inspirations mocked him: wonderful, impossible ideas for bas-reliefs and great symbolic

figures. Strange moods swept through him and strange unreasoning fears. There were visions also —and dreams: visions of things he would have given years of life to forget; dreams from which he awoke in a cold sweat, so shaken that he would lie staring at the darkness, positively afraid to close his eyes.

Very often the dreams were nightmare distortions of realities. These had a horrid knack of recurring at intervals; and the one most dreaded by Mark concerned a minor incident of No Man's Land that had been permanently photographed on his brain.

Always it began at the same point: dusk, illumined fitfully by searchlights and bursting shells; the silhouetted figure of a Sapper subaltern walking coolly into the open with his coil of wire; then the scream of a bursting shell—and there, where the boy had stood, was a mound of earth and debris at a crater's rim.

Later on, the moon revealed something that moved fitfully near the edge of the mound. It was the leg of that Sapper subaltern—buried alive. Under heavy and persistent enemy fire, any attempt at rescue would have been madness; and Mark, digging and carrying all that night, had prayed that a second shell might put the boy out of his misery. But in the morning the leg still moved, and continued to move at intervals all day; till Mark, fresh to such horrors, could endure it no more.

That night, when the firing slackened a little, another figure, armed with a spade, had crept over the parapet and walked coolly out into the open.

And again, just as it reached the mound, a shell

screamed and the earth yawned—and when Mark recovered consciousness, he was lying on his face a good many yards nearer his own trenches, himself half buried in the debris of that other mound, which was now no more. He thanked God the boy was dead; but the memory of that twenty-four hours had haunted him for weeks; and now with pitiless persistence it haunted his dreams.

The fact that he could neither speak nor shake off mental obsessions by a rousing walk, aggravated their tyranny over him; and there were times when it crazed him, almost, to lie there, like a felled tree, powerless even to ask how he could let his dear ones know he was alive.

One morning, in such a mood, he tried to convey by gesture this question that so troubled him; and, to his delight, Sœur Colette understood almost at once. No, Monsieur could neither send nor receive letters until the good day when "les poilus" or "les Tommies" came to their recue. And Monsieur had lost his talisman.

Mark's left hand went quickly to his throat. It was true. The precious silver disc and silver chain were gone. He glanced at his wrist. No leather-coated watch—his mother's gift. Filled with sudden, acute dismay, he went through the dumb show of feeling in coat-pockets.

Again Sœur Colette understood and shook her head. There was nothing in Monsieur's coat—nothing at all. Monsieur le docteur could discover neither his name nor his regiment. In proof of her statement, she brought him the coat. It was rifled very completely. His flask, his gold pencil—Sheila's present—his letter-

case and letters—all gone. The very buttons and badges had been neatly removed; a finishing touch that suggested the gentle German.

And Mark lay there realising that, unless and until he recovered his speech, he was lost, absolutely—even his identity gone.

He was not merely a log, but a nameless log. He chafed at the ignominy of it, as a man in sore straits will chafe at a trifle, yet endure the worst with fortitude.

Suddenly, with vast relief, he remembered his brogues. If only he could tell Sœur Colette to look inside them!

But the attempt produced such wild and ludicrous misunderstandings that the little nun grew embarrassed and Mark gave it up in despair. Perhaps his brogues had also been stolen by the Germans. After all, his precious name was no earthly use to him at present, and the future was a blank.

In this monotonous fashion the first weeks of November ebbed away. On the whole they were left in peace, except for periodical incursions of a rough-mannered German officer with aggressive moustaches, a high narrow forehead, and unmistakable Prussian eyes.

It was his joke, when in a humorous mood, to bid the fierce little doctor hurry up with his contributions for the nearest prison camp in the Fatherland. More than once he infuriated Mark by alluding to him as "that English swine." But it was the thinly-veiled insolence of the man's manner to Sœur Colette that made him long most vehemently for command of his

hands and tongue. Happily for himself, and for those who loved him, he could do no more than glare and clench a hidden fist.

On one occasion it chanced that Captain Adler encountered the flame of impotent wrath in his eyes, and the sight appeared to tickle his Teutonic sense of humour. With deliberate relish and a sneering smile he looked Mark over from head to foot, then turned to the doctor who stood near, inwardly nervous, outwardly fiercer than ever.

"Doubtless the hoch wohlgeboren a without-fear-or-reproach knight is," he remarked, with a contemptuous jerk of his thumb. "But never again will he for the fair-and-distressed lady of his admiration one blow of revenge strike."

Mark could only set his teeth. Sœur Colette, who knew a little German, bent very low over the young Frenchman she was feeding; and the Prussian, chuckling audibly, swung out of the barn.

That afternoon there came a lull in the unceasing rain and wind. The sky cleared and the sun shone out with a divine effulgence upon all the ruin and tragedy wrought by man.

Since Mark's arrival there had been only one such golden interval. It had lasted several days, and he had succeeded in conveying his great wish to be out in the open. So to-day the little doctor and his orderly carried him, bed and all, into the homely garden.

There, storm-draggled chrysanthemums made patches of colour. Stray leaves of Virginia creeper flamed on the walls; and the farmhouse itself gaped roofless to the indifferent heavens. A dovecot, battered

and empty of doves, leaned drunkenly against the barn that was their hospital. The poplars behind it, etched delicately upon the blue, had been stripped, in this terrible autumn, of branches as well as leaves; and the fields beyond were pock-marked by shell fire. Yet peasant women still patiently tended the wounded earth and its products.

Some way off, on rising ground, stood the feudal château—what remained of it: headless turrets, gables shattered and distorted; windows, like empty eye-sockets, mere gaping holes. And the garden, beneath, sloping downward to the river, was a chaos of trampled shrubberies and twisted iron.

Mark, in his utter loneliness, cut off from letters and activity and the companionable gift of speech, could, at least, thank God for the "silver streak" and the grey battleships that preserved his own most sacred treasures from a like fate. But thought of those treasures so tormented him and roused such a buzzing swarm of questions, that he refrained—as far as possible—from futile excursions into the future or the past; and he began to grow impatient for the advent of Sœur Colette with his chocolate.

He accepted, without after-thought, the fact that it was always she who attended him and entertained him; nor was he disposed to quarrel with the arrangement. He had discovered by this time why she created about him an atmosphere of home and of assurance that all was well. Dreaming one night of Sheila, he had waked in the morning to find Sœur Colette standing by his bed; and the haunting sense of familiarity was a puzzle no longer.

For a moment Mark had fancied he must still be

dreaming. Then the nun spoke and the illusion vanished. But the charm remained; a charm that carried him back to early days before Bel's disturbing witchery had changed the complexion of life. In his isolation and bitter uncertainty, he surrendered himself, instinctively, to this blessed illusion of home. It was his one real solace throughout those grey, interminable weeks.

What their one-sided talks and increasing friendliness might mean to Sœur Colette he neither knew, nor sought to know. As a nun, he deemed her sacred, a being set apart. He was apt to forget—as the insolent Adler never forgot—that a nun is nevertheless a woman. But to-day, as the minutes lagged past and she did not appear, there stirred in him an emotion other than mere impatience—an emotion belonging to that virile world where a man could walk and talk and fight and hold a woman in his arms.

He checked himself sharply. That would never do. It was almost as if, through this unknown Frenchwoman, the spirit of Sheila were drawing him back to his old allegiance that, in those July days before the deluge, had been on the verge—he knew it now—of blossoming into a strong and deep love. And she—? Had she, possibly, begun to care? But that also, would never do. He had chosen; or, to be more accurate, Bel had chosen and he had succumbed.

He surveyed his great prostrate figure almost with disgust. Would Bel, as revealed in her recent letters, have any use for a lover who could neither pay her compliments nor take her in his arms? Strange how, in these few weeks, she seemed to have slipped away from him. Even her face eluded his memory. It

was the face and form of his virile little mother that was most constantly with him in these days.

Now, deliberately, he called up a vision of an earlier Bel—unknown, irresistible, ardently desired—sitting on a rock beside the burn awaiting his avowal, while he fondly believed her dreaming her own dreams. This time memory played him no tricks; and the very vividness of the scene intensified his dawning perception of a change, gradual, indefinable, that had crept into their relation since war wrenched them apart. Her first letters, he remembered, had bothered him; and he had found the same lack, the same touch of artificiality in those that had followed him to France. His very hunger for them had only increased the vague disappointment they so often produced. He recalled a remark of hers: "Separations are rather uncanny things." Curiously true—in her own case. While she was with him, it seemed, she approximated instinctively to the woman he would have her be. Without him, she became simply the product of her unsatisfactory antecedents.

Well, he had lost her letters with the rest of his kit; and on the whole he was not sorry. . . .

Just as impatience revived afresh, Sœur Colette and the chocolate appeared at last.

Sight of her recalled the morning's incident and she saw the recollection in his eyes.

"Monsieur must not so concern himself on my account," she said, after apologies for the delay. "If Monsieur could know what one has seen, what one has passed through unharmed, since they drove us from our convent! I have no fear. I am shielded by Our Lady!"

For a few seconds Mark looked hard at her. Then, to her amazement, he blurted out two words, the first he had uttered for a month. "Tell me," he said. His voice sounded strange; but he had produced the right words, and he saw his own exultation repeated in her eyes.

"Ah, Monsieur!" she cried. "It will come at last—the miracle. We have prayed without ceasing. And now—one must obey Monsieur's first command! But it is a story too terrible for altogether telling, Monsieur understands?"

Monsieur understood very well; but he had a great wish to know more of this sainted woman, who smiled with Sheila's smile and spoke with her voice. So in the quiet of that golden afternoon she told him—sitting on the doctor's camp-stool—of the town in Northern France that was her home, and of the bombardment that was the beginning of sorrows; when people lived in their cellars under the shadow of a greater fear than the fear of death. For after the shells came the Uhlans, demanding money and wine and women; above all wine and more wine, drowning their manhood so that no form of brutality came amiss.

With the same unimpassioned detachment, she told him of her own Sisterhood that, in pity, had stayed to help the wounded, and of "la petite Pauline." A novice, beautiful and spirited, she had resented the coarse gallantry of certain German soldiers. Her contempt had roused the devil in them. Embraces not willingly given, must be taken by force.

"And she—poor innocent—she died in my arms, crazed with terror and torment. And they laughed

. . . those devils!" She was silent a moment, looking out over the disfigured landscape. "Monsieur, there are things that even the good God Himself can surely never forgive."

Rising abruptly, she left him—haunted, enraged, half wishing he had not asked for her tale. Yet these were the very abominations that, if ever he reached home again, must be remembered, verified, and mercilessly avenged. She was right, that small fearless woman: there were things that God Himself could not forgive.

From that day there came a slight change in Mark's happy relation with Sœur Colette. Her likeness to Sheila worried him now, almost as much as it had charmed him before. The sense of having unconsciously slipped away from Bel set him idealising her afresh; regilding her halo, till she became again almost the Bel of that July afternoon in the glen, before the shock of her repudiation had temporarily shaken his faith and love.

Sœur Colette, dimly aware of some jar in their communion, suffered her own private shock of awakening. While all went smoothly, she had suspected nothing. Now she knew—and shame overwhelmed her. While her lips had prayed daily for the victorious return of French or British soldiers, her heart, dedicated to the Mother of God, had been secretly dreading the end of this, the one idyll of her saintly life. And because she shrank from confession of that most human lapse, she devised for herself certain penances that failed signally to still the strange new disturbance within.

At last, on a day, the dull thunder she had prayed

for reverberated along the horizon. By slow degrees it rolled nearer, steadily nearer, till Mark could distinguish the familiar note of bursting shells. Then it was that he began to ask himself—would the Germans think him worth taking along with them as a prisoner of war?

He hoped they might not even be given time to save their own skins.

CHAPTER II

"So hard it seems that one must bleed
Because another needs will bite!
All round we find cold nature slight
The feelings of the totter-knee'd."

MEREDITH.

LADY FORSYTH sat in her bedroom window-seat, looking out over the terrace to the restless pine woods tossed and tumbled by the wind. Masses of grey cloud sagged low above the trees. Here and there patches of fragile blue showed fitfully. Then the sun took courage and flashed a pale smile from between two scurrying clouds. Gradually the sky cleared. The wet flags of the terrace gleamed like polished steel. Drenched and dismal trees stood suddenly transfigured. Every leaf and twig flaunted a diamond.

"How Mark would love it!" was the mother's instinctive thought: and closing her eyes a moment she lifted her face to the sun's caress. The clear light revealed lines that had not been there in August. She had passed through deep waters, this bereaved woman, who refused to own herself bereaved: and in some ways the past week had seemed the longest, the hardest of all. While Bel mourned her lover as dead, she, who refused to mourn her son, had been subjected to requests for photographs and details

for obituary notices. She had been threatened with a fresh epidemic of condolences; and, finally, in self-defence, had sent a brief notice to the *Times*, and *Morning Post*, announcing that Sir Mark Forsyth's family had not yet given up hope. Let them denounce her for a fool if they chose! The flame within still burned on; tremulous, unquenchable.

When she looked down again, two figures had appeared on the terrace: Sheila and Mr. Seldon, moving very slowly, deep in talk. The man was tall and thin, with a small, aristocratic head. He could not yet walk without crutches; but, by a miracle of surgery, the leg had been saved. He seemed a homeless creature: parents dead; married sister in India; and Sheila had begged that he might spend part of his convalescence at Wynchcombe Friars.

She was quite frankly interested in his new development. Whether that interest went deeper, Lady Forsyth found it hard to tell; the more so, that she felt doubtful how far Sheila had ever let herself go in respect of Mark. That she loved him was certain, and natural enough; but the extent and nature of that love was her own most hidden secret, kept under lock and key.

Lady Forsyth herself had hoped honestly, for Sheila's sake, that the girl's heart was not given irrevocably to Mark. Yet here she was, with her native inconsistency, resenting the least sign that it might have strayed elsewhere. She had the grace to remind herself that Sheila—by temperament and by her own shy confession—was made for marriage, for motherhood. But—it must not be Seldon. On that point Helen was unwavering: though, in spite of

drawbacks, she liked the man. She found him clever, interesting, and annoyingly self-conscious. Sheila, it seemed, had complete faith in his remarkable transmutation. Helen privately doubted whether it would outlast the stimulus of the war. She even suspected him of playing up to the girl's new view of him in the hope that so he might win her after all.

Well, Sheila was strong enough and wise enough to work out her own salvation; but there were moments when Helen was half tempted to wish that Mr. Seldon had stuck to his desert station and his whisky.

By now the fugitive gleam had brought two more figures into the garden: Ralph Melrose, with his left arm in a sling, and Mona's young step-brother, Eldred Laurence: an infant of twenty who had been through everything from Mons to Ypres. He limped badly and wore a bandage over one eye. Both boys, Helen perceived, had brought back from their great ordeal an engaging modesty and cheerfulness; a truer perspective of things in general. And they were not rare phenomena. They were average specimens of their kind; standing proofs of the hard paradox that "the senseless, devilish, bestial thing" called War had, even in a few months, done more to lift and enlarge the characters of those who waged it, in a right spirit, than a decade of material prosperity and peace.

These three convalescents, and one other, represented Helen's household of the moment. That other was the Rev. George Wilton, Wynchmere's new curate. In an impulse of kindliness—since regretted—Helen had succumbed to the importunity of Mrs. Clutterbuck on his behalf. With a battalion temporarily billeted

on the little town, there were simply no "rooms" to be had; none, at least, that suited the Rev. Wilton's fastidious taste. The one Hotel was over-crowded with officers. Three subalterns had invaded the Vicarage and Mrs. Clutterbuck was in a quiver of anxiety over the possible effect upon her two plain daughters of khaki and frivolous conversation for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. If "dear Lady Forsyth" would take pity on Mr. Wilton, it would be an "act of Christian kindness," and who knew but she might find herself entertaining an angel unawares!

She had entertained the angel for a week, now, and was only aware of having stumbled on a specimen of sanctified snobbery, who annoyed her to exasperation. Though she numbered among her friends more than one Scottish Minister, the average English curate had a knack of setting all her bristles on end: and Mr. Wilton was the average curate—with aggravations.

"He is what Americans would call a 'bromide,'" she had written to Keith shortly after his arrival. "He discovers the obvious with enthusiasm. He asks me for the toast or the salt as apologetically as if he were asking for a five pound note; and he says '*Eg*-zactly' to every word I utter—almost before it's out! When I'm in a really wicked mood, I contradict myself wildly just to test his mental and moral agility! I'm convinced I shall catch him out one day, backing up compulsion, or the right of churchmen to defend their country. And he's dead against both. By which you may see that I'm badly needing the *two* of you to keep me in order. . . ."

By this time it was four o'clock. The strollers

had gone in for tea: and as Helen rose to join them, the "angel unawares" came flapping down the path through the rose-garden, a neatly folded mackintosh and an unrolled umbrella hanging over his left arm.

There had been a partial movement of troops. He had been out to "try his luck": and in that one respect, at least, she was his fervent well-wisher.

She found them all in the drawing-room and Sheila making tea.

"Couldn't wait for you, Mums," she apologised. "The kettle was having a fit!"

The two subalterns rose at her entrance. But it was Wilton who secured her favourite chair and pushed it a couple of inches nearer the table.

"I hope you didn't have your long wet walk in vain?" she said; and he turned an eloquent eye upon her as he sank back among his cushions.

"I *think* not. But even if I had, I cannot pretend I should have suffered serious disappointment." His gaze wandered appreciatively round the firelit room. "It has been such a pleasure—such a privilege . . . Muffins? Sandwiches?"

He proffered them with eager empressement; and proceeded to recount, in minutest detail, the happy chance by which he believed he had at last secured the good cooking, the south aspect and the unlimited supply of hot water indispensable to his well-being.

Lady Forsyth, it must be admitted, listened with only one ear. The other was attentively following a discussion between Ralph and Laurence as to the best means of making a sheltered, complacent people

"sit up and begin to take notice of the scrap across the water."

Laurence was for compulsion; Ralph for a vigorous revival of his Majesty's Opposition; and Helen was a keen advocate of both. Skilfully and politely, she slipped away from the vexed question of curtains and pictures to the more congenial occupation of reconstructing the Government, and "rounding up" the slackers who were obviously "waiting to be fetched."

"Nothing short of *that*," she concluded in her emphatic fashion, "will disturb their casual conviction that England can beat Germany with one hand tied behind her back."

It was a subject on which she was apt to wax hot, even a trifle caustic; but never, since Wilton's arrival, had she spoken with such vehemence as she felt suddenly moved to do by sheer irritation at his womanish fiddle-faddling. For a while he listened in mute amazement, with the bird-like tilt of his head and eyes riveted on her face. Then, as she paused to empty her cup, he leaned a little towards her.

"But *dear* Lady Forsyth," he asked in his slowest, silkiest tones, "how, precisely, would you define that somewhat loose term of disparagement—a slacker?"

"A self-regarding, spiritual sluggard," she answered him with a straight look. "Is that precise enough? The 'slacker'—so far as I understand the breed—would rather *not* see England share the fate of Belgium; but would very *much* rather not risk his life or limbs, to avert the calamity. At best, he is afflicted with a disease called 'humanitarianism,' that would have

men save their skins at the cost of everything that makes their skins worth saving. At worst, he simply shirks his obvious duty for the sake of his own peace and comfort."

"Hear, hear!" from the three convalescents and from Wilton a faint gasp of dismay.

"*Eg*-zactly," he murmured automatically, fingering his remnant of cake. "But that sounds . . . *just* a little sweeping; not to say severe."

With a sigh of impatience, Lady Forsyth rose and went over to the fire. Her cheeks were flushed; but her hands and feet were cold.

"Certain sorts of people *require* a dash of severity," she remarked to the room at large. "Browning was right. There are some souls 'terror must burn the truth into' . . . A good many in these islands, high and low."

Wilton nervously cleared his throat. "Ah—Browning," he struck in, evading the issue. "A stimulating writer. Rather too rough and obscure for my taste."

"That's not the point." She dismissed his taste impatiently. Interruption annoyed her when she was well under way. "The point is terror burning the truth into people, who have a positive genius for shutting their eyes to it—if it's likely to make them uncomfortable. One wonders, will even these unmasked Germans convince our intellectuals that evil in all its forms is a deadly reality, to be fought and conquered; not a sort of moral indigestion to be cured with sugar-coated tabloids! Between science and civilisation, we've exploded hell and chloroformed the devil. And if we're properly advanced, we can't

even commit sin. We are merely the victims of environment or inherited tendencies. Nothing like the polysyllable steam-roller for flattening out awkward facts! Take the case of the slacker. What does his argument amount to in Saxon English? 'I don't see the force of risking my life for my country.' But deck it out in polysyllables, and you can conjure it into quite a lofty sentiment. You try, Mr. Wilton, in your next sermon——"

"Hullo, here comes Sheila's scarlet spider." Ralph's voice from the window-seat broke the thread of her monologue and saved the slightly staggered curate from further discomfiture. "A wire for one of us!"

Lady Forsyth started. "Keith!" was her instant thought. "Ralph, dear, run and get it," she said. "Hester's out."

An odd silence fell till he reappeared. "For you," he said, "and the imp's waiting."

With a sudden leap of conviction, she tore it open and read: "Sir Mark Forsyth is alive and wounded but safe. I have letter from France. Posting to-night."

It was signed by Mark's bootmaker at Winchester. But, at the moment, her brain took in nothing beyond the incredible fact. Mark was there—across the Channel. She could go to him. . . .

"Any answer?" Ralph asked.

She shook her head. Then, suddenly, she looked up, with a strange, uncertain smile. "Mark is alive—safe!" she said, an uncontrollable note of triumph in her low voice.

She saw Sheila rise; heard disjointed sounds from

the four men: then a rush of tears blinded her, and she hurried out of the room.

It was some time before Sheila joined her. She, who had shared all, knew that the mother's first ecstasy of reprieve was a matter between her own soul and God. And Sheila herself found it hard to speak calmly of this great news. The blaze of it made one realise what a shadowy thing hope had been at best.

She found Lady Forsyth sitting over her fire drowned fathoms deep in the wonder of it all. Undried tears gleamed on her cheeks and the precious telegram lay unheeded on the floor.

Sheila knelt down by her and they clung together in silence. Then, casually, Sheila picked up the telegram. "I want—to see it written," she murmured with a sudden stab of recollection. "But—why Jevons?"

"That's the mystery. Why should *he* get a letter about my boy? And what's wrong with Mark that he didn't write himself? Oh my dear, what marvels of perversity we are! Here have I kept myself going for weeks by the firm belief that we must get him back: and now it's come, I'm a shivering sceptic. I have almost to pinch myself to make sure it's not a dream."

But Sheila standing by her was reading the telegram over and over. "It's no dream," she said. "It's—a miracle. I suppose we can't wire to Mr. Macnair or Colonel Munro till you get that letter. But—there's Bel."

"Yes—there's Bel." A pause. "I hope the shock of joy will unfreeze her. She'd better come here, if she can. Get me a form, darling, and see if the men

are happy. I'd like to sit here peacefully till dinner —and think about my boy."

Sheila dropped a kiss on her hair and vanished: not for long.

"Quite happy, are they? *All* of them?" Lady Forsyth asked when the wire had been despatched. "I'm pricked with faint compunction over the curate man. He roused the devil in me with his hot bath and his art curtains. But I didn't mean to hit quite so hard. . . ."

Sheila's eyes twinkled. "I'm afraid we all loved it! And you needn't be pricked with compunction, Dearest. I found him on the drawing-room sofa, quite audibly asleep, with his mouth open!"

"There are *some* souls . . . !" Helen confided to the blazing logs.

That evening was the liveliest that the convalescents had experienced at Wynchcombe Friars. After dinner Lady Forsyth played to them for the first time. Music was the one adequate outlet for her pent-up emotion. She chose only triumphal themes and she played them triumphantly. Let her audience understand if they chose.

Seldon, ensconced in an armchair by the fire, listened with rapt attention, his neat profile cut like a cameo on the oak panelling beyond. Sheila sat near him on the wide fender-stool, absorbed in her own thoughts.

Suddenly when the music was loudest he leaned towards her over the arm of his chair.

"Miss Melrose," he said in a low voice. "Do tell me, who is—Bel? Is she a connection? What's her other name?"

Sheila started and looked round.

"Alison," she said, "Bel Alison. She's engaged—to Sir Mark. Why? D'you know her?"

"I seem to remember the name," he answered evasively. "A tall, striking-looking girl?"

"Yes." His manner pricked Sheila's curiosity; but she did not repeat her question.

"Coming to-morrow, is she?"

"Yes," Sheila said again; and this time a wild possibility darted through her brain.

Seldon, frowning and biting his lip, still scrutinised the fire. "Sounds like a girl—I met one summer," he remarked casually. "Odd if it is the same.—And she's to be mistress of all this? She's in luck. Sir Mark, I take it, is a very fine fellow?"

"A very fine fellow," the girl answered; and for a few minutes Seldon seemed to ponder her statement. Then, with an odd jerk of his head, he abruptly changed the subject.

"A treat to hear playing like that. What with gramaphones and things, people won't be bothered nowadays. And she's got such a ripping touch."

"She's inspired to-night," Sheila said, glancing towards the slender upright figure in the dull blue teagown, shot through with gold, woven for her by Mark's people and designed by Mark himself.

Seldon, it was evident, would say no more about Bel. That in itself lent colour to the wild possibility that Sheila hoped, for Mark's sake, was too wild to be true. The bare chance of it so troubled her that long after she had soothed Lady Forsyth into a deep sleep, she lay wide-eyed, in her own little room, wondering and dreading and piecing things

together; wishing fervently that Seldon had held his tongue.

Well, to-morrow she would see them together; and Bel, ignorant of Mr. Seldon's anonymous confidences, would almost certainly give herself away.

CHAPTER III

"She gave no vine of Love to rear,
Love's wine drank not; yet bent her ear
To themes of Love no less."

MEREDITH.

NEXT morning, in spite of her vigil, Sheila appeared earlier than usual in Lady Forsyth's room, to share tea and letters—especially letters. And there failed not the envelope with the Winchester postmark.

The bootmaker—respectfully amazed and delighted—begged to enclose a letter in French whose contents he had learnt from a Belgian refugee. It was written in Sœur Colette's fine clear hand; and beneath her modest signature a circle of sealing-wax bore the Forsyth crest.

At sight of it the mother's tears started. "Oh, I'm an idiot. Read it to me, darling," she said handing the letter to Sheila. And Sheila read in a low steady voice, the plain tale, simple yet astonishing, of Mark's threefold reprieve from death: of the mystery that surrounded him till Sœur Colette—who attributed every detail to the goodness of God and the Holy Virgin—discovered his name and regiment written inside his brogues; of the victorious French Army that returned at last, scattering and annihilating "les Boches" so that there was scant time for

collecting sick prisoners or indeed for anything but a hurried retreat upon stronger positions.

"But already," continued the writer, "M. le docteur had of his wisdom made them to suppose that Monsieur was without hope of recovery. May the good God forgive him that deception so well-intended. Possessing no other address, I venture to report these matters to M. le cordonnier, trusting that they may yet arrive to the relations of Monsieur Sir Forsyth who is of a courage and patience unsurpassed. Having power to move his left hand he has pressed with his own ring the wax one has spilt upon this page for a message to Madame his mother. If one should come soon and take him to Paris, M. le docteur has great hope that in time he will walk and speak as before."

Thus Sœur Colette, in her saintly simplicity; and neither of the women, who read and read again the letter she had written, with tears and prayers, caught a glimpse of the idyll that had saddened and glorified her life. They had far too much, on their own account, to think of, to give thanks for, and to do.

"Oh, if I could only pack up and start this instant!" was the cry of Helen's impatient spirit. "And he, lying paralysed, all these weeks—my poor darling!"

The first obvious move was a telegram to Keith, care of Colonel Munro, whom he kept informed of his movements: more telegrams to relations and friends; and—a letter to Mark. Life was suddenly real again; purposeful, genuinely worth living.

Soon after breakfast came a wire from Bel. "Thanks for splendid news. Arriving Westover 4.15."

"I'll take the car out and meet her," Sheila announced with decision,

Something in her tone made Lady Forsyth look up from the letter she was writing. "Very sweet of you, my lamb," she said: but Sheila knew that sweetness had nothing whatever to do with it. "Crown your virtue by giving his Reverence a lift into Wynchmere as you go through. We shall scarcely escape tears at parting! The fleshpots and the title and the joy of casually airing it can be trusted to eclipse all my egregious remarks."

It seemed she was not far wrong. After lunch Wilton hovered about like a tame rook, murmuring plaintive platitudes, lamenting his inability to put into adequate words . . . and so on and so forth. But at the last, spurred by inexorable sounds without, he found, in one breath, the adequate word and the courage to speak it.

"*Dear* Lady Forsyth," he murmured bowing over her hand. "It has been such a privilege. Quite a liberal education. So hard to tear oneself away! At lunch I was wishing—forgive the audacity—that I had the luck to be your son. Then I need never go away."

"My son?" She started and changed colour: at that moment it was the last audacity she felt disposed to forgive. "If you were my son, Mr. Wilton, you'd have to go a good deal farther than Wynchmere. I should send you straight out to France—where you ought to be now."

The startled curate drew back as if from a blow. "But my cloth—my sacred calling——"

She gave him a direct look. "It may surprise you," she said. "But I have looked carefully through the ordering of priests and the Thirty-nine Articles

and I can find there no admonition whatever that churchmen shall abstain from bearing arms in defence of their country. And look at the French priests. Hundreds of them in the ranks; lifting the Church, by their manliness and courage, to a position it has not occupied since the Revolution. I know several clergymen, Scottish and English, with the colours. And I am quite *sure* their sacred calling has suffered no stain because they have bayoneted a few Germans and quitted themselves like men. *They* will preach sermons worth hearing, those brave fellows . . . if they win through. It's men, real men, that we need if the Church is to regain her lost hold on us all."

"*Eg*-zactly," he agreed inadvertently, to her huge delight.

"Well then—why not go out and qualify——?"

"Impossible, dear lady, *im*possible." He reddened distressfully lifting one long hand as if to ward off the devil in person. "Others—I would not presume to judge. Every man is ultimately responsible to the Inner Light. And *my* conscience would never permit——"

"That settles it," she interposed briskly, without a touch of flippancy. "We can't start a full-dress debate on the doorstep; Miss Melrose has a train to meet. I hope the hot water and the cooking and the curtains will leave nothing to be desired. I mean it," she added with her kindest smile, and handed him over to Sheila, who had found some difficulty in dispensing with the services of Ralph.

Wilton was abnormally silent all the way to Wynchmere; and Sheila was absorbed in her driving and her own thoughts. At intervals the pensive curate

glanced at her under his eyelids; appraised her charming profile—a shade too resolute for his taste—and her capable handling of the machine. Yet his thoughts were practical rather than sentimental. Thanks to a natural genius for gleaning personal items, he already knew that Sheila Melrose possessed advantages which distinctly enhanced her charming profile. In the common phrase of parish gossips there was "plenty of money going" at Westover Court. Mrs. Melrose, he learnt, was a Burlton, daughter of a great steel magnate in the North; married, by some queer freak of fate, to George Melrose, the distinguished antiquarian. Melrose, himself,—shy and clever, drowned fathoms deep in his researches—appeared to spend most of his time in Egypt, where Sheila had stayed with him on her way from India. Not even the War, nor a very real affection for his youngest daughter, had power to lure him back to the uncongenial atmosphere of the old home he had once so loved that, in order to save it, he had married money. Then, too late, a lucky speculation had considerably increased his own private means; and, as Westover Court had become a stronghold of the entire Burlton family, he had found it expedient to spend a good deal of his time elsewhere.

Wynchmere had duly given the new curate its garbled history of the Melrose *ménage;* but for Wilton the chief point of interest lay in the assurance that all three daughters would be well dowered; and this one was an open favourite at Wynchcombe Friars. Decidedly, if it came to business, the youngest Miss Melrose would do very well.

The glow of this secret decision made his limp

handshake at parting a degree less limp than usual: but Sheila wore thick driving gloves and was visibly in a hurry to be gone.

At Westover station she annexed Bel—radiant, friendly, and eager for further news.

"Sheila—is it stark true?" she asked as they spun along between bare hedges. "Have you got the mysterious letter? Who wrote it? Please tell everything."

And Sheila told—keeping her eyes on the wheel.

At the word "paralysis" Bel started.

"Oh, how horrible! So disfiguring.—I suppose Lady Forsyth will go out to him. And she believed it all the time. Isn't she a wonder? *I* can't, even now. Not till I see him and feel him——"

There flashed a vivid memory of her first drive along this familiar road, when Mark had sat beside her in the August sunlight: and she fell silent, thinking her own thoughts.

Sheila had just braced herself to a casual mention of Seldon, when Bel spoke again.

"Any wounded at Wynchcombe Friars just now?"

"Yes, three of them. Ralph—almost well. Mona's brother, Mr. Laurence. Such a delightful boy; and Mr. Seldon, an Indian civilian. Came over as a despatch-rider——"

"Seldon? From India?" It was enough. Sheila knew now that the wild possibility was true. "A thin dark man, is he? Clever and rather good-looking?"

"Yes. Have you been in India?"

Sheila looked round now, curious to see if Bel were the least put out by the reappearance of a lover she

had cruelly hurt and deceived. On the contrary she seemed interested and rather amused. "No. I met him on leave in Cornwall, some years ago. Odd he should turn up again here!"

"Not so very," Sheila said with her small smile. "You see, he's a friend of mine. I met him in India and we've corresponded ever since. Then he came over to France: and I found him one day among the wounded at Boulogne."

"Oh, *you* know him too!" Bel's amusement increased visibly. "D'you like him? I thought him rather a poor specimen."

"The war has brought out all the best in him," Sheila remarked. Every moment she grew angrier with Bel; angrier, and more resolute to get at the truth—in good time. For months she had been sitting down severely on her own deep-seated jealousy and pain; and this final proof of Bel's utter unworthiness, coming at such a moment, seemed to shake the foundations of things.

Some women, it appeared, were privileged to go about the world sowing pain and reaping adulation: and Sheila, whose creed was acceptance, was still young enough to be badly tripped up, on occasion, by the bewildering injustices of life. It was her private opinion that Bel deserved to be hurt, and probably never would be. Not that she consciously sat in judgment. There was nothing of the prig in her composition. But, because her heart was the biggest thing about her, she held peculiarly sacred the hearts of men, that, for Bel and her kind, are so many counters on the gaming-tables of life. Small, contained creature though she was, sins of passion or

emotion were the sins she could most readily understand and condone. It was Bel's smiling, unassailable selfishness that alienated and enraged her. And Mark, with his fiery sensitive spirit, at the mercy of such an one for life! The thought of it was almost more than she could bear.

For Bel, herself, Sheila was simply a rather sweet person who did not count in the least. Nothing counted much, at the moment, except Mark and his unbelievable resurrection. Yet she had no intention of going out with Lady Forsyth. That was not her way. Certain of his coming, she could wait. Meantime her resurgent spirit, hungry for enjoyment, saw possibilities in the Seldon coincidence that might serve to pass the time.

She turned smilingly to the suppressed volcano at her side.

"I say, Sheila, does Mr. Seldon know I'm coming? Does he know . . . I'm engaged to Mark?"

"Yes. We spoke of it last night."

"Did he say anything about meeting me before?"

"He seemed to remember the name," Sheila answered casually. It was the truth, if not the whole truth; and she could not resist the chance of administering a flick to Bel's omnivorous vanity. The flick told. It also goaded Bel into further revelations than she had intended.

"I fancy he'll remember more than my name when we meet," she remarked, looking out over the sodden December landscape. "Not so *very* long ago I was accused of having spoilt his life and broken his heart: a tougher organism than sentimental people care to admit!"

Sheila betrayed no surprise. She would not condescend to feign ignorance. "You could hardly expect him to parade a broken heart in the circumstances," was all she said.

Bel laughed. "Well hit! What a practical person you are. I merely thought he might have told you, as you correspond and are evidently great friends."

Sheila did not answer. She was skilfully manipulating a sharp turn into the town. Bel watched her in frank admiration.

"How awfully well you drive! Who taught you?"

"Mr. Macnair."

"Oh! *I* always feel that man being horribly critical underneath. But you're evidently privileged! Is *he*—another great friend?"

"Yes."

"Mark, too! You've quite a talent in that line."

Sheila felt the light scratch under the velvet tone, and turned her clear eyes full on Bel.

"You mean—they don't fall in love with me? Well, sometimes friendship is the higher compliment."

"Sour grapes!" reflected Bel. Aloud she said sweetly: "It's a compliment no man has ever paid me yet. And I can do very well with . . . the other thing. Even if it results in only seeming to remember my name!"

That was all for the moment. But it set Sheila thoroughly on edge; nor were matters improved by Bel's behaviour throughout the evening.

Seldon she greeted without a shadow of embarrassment; asked after mutual acquaintances in Cornwall; smilingly held his gaze a moment; then, as it were,

consigned him to Sheila, who missed no item of the by-play between them.

Later on, though ostensibly devoting herself to Lady Forsyth and young Laurence, Bel never for a moment allowed Seldon to be unaware of her. It was a situation that appealed to all the actress in her; and the whole performance was a piece of finished coquetry, perfect of its kind.

As for Seldon, he clung to Sheila with nervous tenacity, as a man might cling to a talisman against witchcraft; but his eyes and ears and the back of his mind were intent on Bel. He talked in spasms and his self-consciousness was more pronounced than ever. Painfully he recalled the Seldon of Indian days: and before the evening was over Sheila had arrived at wondering could he, with open eyes, revert to the girl who had used him so ill? Were his love and friendship for herself such mere card-houses that they could tumble to earth at a flicker of Bel's long eyelashes, a careless word from her lips?

The bare supposition was unflattering to say the least. More; it was a shock to her young, ardent faith in human nature. She had seen this man rise—in a measure through love of her—above his lesser self. She had been proud of him and for him. Though he could marry neither of them, he was hers in a very special sense; and Bel had no right to him whatever. But the heart, like the tongue, can no man tame; and Seldon's whole manner to Sheila that evening conveyed the mute attestation: "I am yours. Yet, if she beckons, I follow in spite of myself."

It was not a heroic confession. It angered Sheila,

even while it moved her to pity. She hated the whole distracting affair: and felt thankful that Lady Forsyth was incapable of perceiving anything but the one supreme fact: thankful, even, that she would soon be gone.

Next day came a telegram from Keith bidding her get a passport to Boulogne whither he would bring Mark—Authority permitting—in the Forsyth-Macnair ambulance car. And for the time being, all lesser matters were in abeyance.

Bel decided not to go; and Lady Forsyth was too relieved to press the point. Sheila did most of the packing and dropped a few secret, rebellious tears into Mark's valise. It hurt her bitterly that she could not go too and complete the old happy quartet that had seemed linked indissolubly till Bel stepped into the picture and upset everything. She had a knack of unsettling things whenever she appeared; and that without seeming to lift a finger. In a minor way, she was doing it again; doing it admirably; while Sheila anointed Mark's familiar ties and shirts with her tears.

Quite incidentally it occurred to Lady Forsyth that five young people could not, without scandalising the proprieties, be left entirely to themselves.

"It's ridiculous nonsense," she declared with a touch of impatience. "And everyone's far too busy to be bothered. Bel, how about your Harry? Not married, of course, but still——"

Bel smiled. "The more the safer, I suppose? It's quite a pretty problem in arithmetic: how many women, unmarried, equal one woman, married?

Harry could come to-morrow, I think, for a few days."

"Good. And Mrs. Laurence might manage the week end. Wire at once, dear, will you? Say I leave this afternoon. I can't put off going for any Propriety-bogey in creation."

So that afternoon she set out on her glad errand, armed with letters and messages of welcome to him who, for five weeks, had been counted dead by all except two brave women in England and the two men who sought him in France.

Harry wired that she would come next day, and throughout that evening, Propriety—even in the person of Mrs. Clutterbuck—could have found nothing to cavil at in the behaviour of the five young people left temporarily unshepherded at Wynchcombe Friars.

Only Sheila became increasingly aware of the effect wrought upon Seldon by Bel's discreetly veiled coquetry. Beneath his restlessness and his half-defiant flippancy, she discerned the man's inner flutterings that affected her like the sight of a live butterfly impaled by a pin. She herself was quieter than usual; but under the still surface her anger was rising steadily; and before dinner was over, she knew that she could not sleep to-night, till she had spoken her mind to Bel.

CHAPTER IV

"It is the worst of crimes to feel life so cheap, and make it so expensive for other people."—MARY A. HAMILTON.

PUNCTUALLY at ten she made a move; and as she bid Seldon good night his eyes clung to her face with a pathetic mixture of apology and appeal. It needed only that look to stiffen her resolve; though the last thing she wanted at the moment was a quarrel with Bel. She hoped it might not amount to that; but she felt half afraid of her own inner tumult as she knocked lightly at Bel's door.

She found the girl already half undressed, sitting before her glass in a cream-coloured wrapper, her pale hair falling to her waist. Her face so framed, looked engagingly young. She was smiling frankly at her own image; and an aftermath of the same smile served as greeting to her unexpected visitor.

"Come for a talk? How nice of you!"

She indicated a chair near the fire; and Sheila, glad of the warmth, set one silver-shod foot on the fender. But she remained standing—a slim grey figure with a knot of turquoise blue at her waist and a blue fillet threaded through the dark cloud of her hair.

So, for the first time, they seriously confronted one another, these two——

"I'm not so sure," said Sheila slowly, "that you'll think it nice of me when you hear what I have to say."

Bel's eyes expressed polite enquiry.

"Nothing very formidable, I hope? And, for Heaven's sake, don't be tragic. I've had enough tragedy, all these weeks, to last me a lifetime."

"So have . . . most of us," Sheila put in quietly. "And there's no question of tragedy, for any one, if you'll only leave poor Mr. Seldon alone."

"Oh, that's all, is it? Hands off your property, in fact?"

"Nothing of the sort." Sheila's temper flared up, do what she would. "Hands off a man who has suffered *more* than enough on your account already. I think if you realised how much——"

"Suffered—has he? And poured it all into your sympathetic ears? I rather suspected he was gone on you."

"Well, then—*why* can't you let him be? Isn't one splendid lover enough for you?"

"To possess—certainly," Bel answered with her invincible good-humour. "That man Seldon's a mere invertebrate. But he's clever, in his own way; and he amuses me. If *you* don't want him for yourself, why in the world d'you bother about him?"

"Simply because he's a human being and he's made a plucky fight against things, and—he's my friend."

"Why not mine too?"

"Friendship is not one of your gifts, Bel. The only kindness you can do him is—what I said: let him alone. He mayn't be worth very much. But he is worth something . . . now. Even you'd admit that

if you'd seen him as I did, last autumn: a wretched cynical man with no heart in his work. Drinking too, from sheer loneliness and ill-health. And so obviously needing a woman in his life that it was hard to refuse him. In the end—that I mightn't think too badly of him—he told me about that summer in Cornwall. And . . . to think it should have been *you!*"

Something in her tone drew Bel's eyes to her face.

"Well, what harm? I didn't commit murder. I refused him—as you did. That's all."

"It's *not* all," Sheila flashed out. "Bel—don't prevaricate. He . . . he told me everything."

Bel started and a faintly hostile gleam showed in her eyes. Then, very deliberately, she combed back a lock that had fallen half over her face.

"May I ask—what 'everything' amounted to?"

Sheila moistened her lips. "Well . . . the way you simply made use of him to secure that other man . . . the married one. Mr. Seldon heard afterwards that you—went away with him. That he didn't believe, except when he felt bitter enough to believe anything. Bel—*is* it true? Any of it? I *must* know."

She spoke with unguarded urgency; and Bel turned clear hard eyes upon her. The hostile gleam was no longer faint.

"Why must you know what is entirely my own affair? In order to tell Lady Forsyth, or Mark, and make trouble between us, after all I've just been through? Model of virtue though you are, I believe you'd give your beautiful violet eyes to put Mark out of love with me. But you never will. Men don't easily

leave off loving me. Mr. Seldon's a case in point. I understand one side of them. And I understand it thoroughly. Mark's a bit straight-laced about some things. But he's tremendously a man. And he'll love *me*—worthless me—to the end of the chapter, whatever I may have done, or do!"

Sheila—amazed, disgusted and angrier than ever—had listened so far without interruption, simply because she could not trust herself to speak. At that moment she hated Bel, as she had never hated any fellow-being; and her white Northern anger would rather have vented itself in blows than words. But, by this time, she had herself in hand.

"*I* tell Mark?" she said, on a note of concentrated scorn, ignoring the implication of her motive. "It's for you to tell him—whatever there is to tell."

Bel let out a breath of relief. "Then he'll remain in blessed ignorance. Men don't bore us with a recital of their pre-nuptial peccadilloes. They've too much sense. So why the dickens should we inflict ours on them? I'm a modern woman, Sheila. You're not: for all you're the younger. And Mark himself isn't quite modern enough for my taste. It's my only quarrel with him."

She had quite recovered her complacence now. Tilting her head, she swept the brush through her long fine hair: and Sheila stood watching her a moment, fascinated unwillingly.

Then with a small sigh she sat down.

"I rather think," she said slowly, "that, if this war goes on long enough, it is you up-to-date people who will end in being out-of-date. But Bel—" she hesitated. Fuller knowledge would serve no purpose

save to increase her own secret misery. Yet, perversely, she still wanted to know. "Are you admitting that what Mr. Seldon heard was true?"

"Just true enough to be a spiteful lie," Bel answered enigmatically, discarding her brush and resting her bare arms on the table. "What *are* you getting at, you determined little person?"

"The truth—if I can. I don't want to be unjust to you."

"Very scrupulous!"

Bel paused a moment, smiling at her own image . . . considering. . . .

She was not given to verbal indiscretions, but she had her reckless impulses: and with Sheila she instinctively knew herself safe; knew that the truth demanded of her by this gentle, inexorable girl would hurt the more because—for very love of Mark and his mother—Sheila could be trusted to keep silence. Hidden knowledge of that kind rankles and pricks, as Bel had learnt from experience; and her own galling sense of Sheila's finer loyalty and courage made the impulse to hurt and startle her irresistible.

"Well," she said at length, turning from the glass, just as Sheila had given up hope of hearing more, "as you evidently won't play the sneak, I don't mind admitting that I had every intention of going off with that other man to Australia. I was at a loose end: in the mood for any escape from humdrum England and sufficiently in love to be tempted. It was Harry, with her awkward genius for rescue-work, who upset the apple-cart. So my 'going off' with him amounted to no more than a week end together at the Lizard——"

"Bel!"

"Don't look so scarified, my dear innocent! Heaps of the smartest girls do that sort of thing;—or rather did, in happier days than these. And properly modern-minded men condoned it. If you're for giving women freedom you can't tie them by the leg to the conventional moralities; and I wasn't going to take such a big risk without due consideration. So he found rooms in a wee cottage at the Lizard and we went there—as temporary brother and sister—to do the considering. He behaved beautifully; and, in the end, we decided to take the plunge. Harry happened to be in Cornwall just then, tackling a troublesome 'case'. So I arranged to go to her and join him in London when he wired. But somehow, she suspicioned what was up: and as she believes in the emancipation of woman, I thought she'd take it reasonably. However—she didn't; and there was the devil to pay. I stood out against her; but she got at him and worked him up over his precious children. So the great adventure fizzled out. And Harry, having rescued me, has stuck to me ever since. I suppose some of the fools at Bude heard we'd been to the Lizard and invented the rest. There! That's the extent of my villainy. The whole thing's dead and gone, and you must admit I'd be a prize fool to tell Mark. He'd worry needlessly; and distrust me. Also needlessly. If any man can hold a woman, it's Mark. Of course you think I'm not fit to black his boots. I'm not. I've told him so. But it's *me* he wants, my dear,—good or bad. Look here, though; not a word of all this to your 'Mums.' *She'd* never forgive me."

"No. Never." Sheila's cheeks were flushed and

her lips set. "I'm not sure that . . . Mark would either. I simply can't understand. . . ."

"Didn't suppose you would." Bel smiled sweetly. "You're too limited. That's the trouble with you good people——"

"Mark's not limited," Sheila broke out with sudden passion. "No more is Mums. Oh—and to think I told her, without knowing it . . . the very day you two were out in the yacht——"

"That day? Really, this approaches the dramatic! But never you give her the key to your story. Promise!"

Sheila sighed. "I'm not likely to—for her sake; though it isn't easy keeping anything from Mums. We're so close to each other all through."

"Well, you must manage it somehow," Bel said with decision. "And I expect you have your reserves even from her. Have you ever, I wonder, let her realise that you're dead in love—with Mark?"

"How *dare* you!" Sheila broke in low and fiercely, "when I've tried to do you justice—to be friends——"

She checked herself, rose, and turned her back on Bel, grasping the mantelpiece with her small fine hands.

The girl surveyed her in genuine surprise.

"I'm sorry," she said good-naturedly. "One would think I'd accused you of stealing! It's no sin!"

Sheila swung round in an access of sheer impatience. "This time it's *you* who don't understand! If that sort of thing's not sacred to you, it is to me——"

Bel faintly raised her brows. "No," she said, "I don't understand people who mix up falling in

love with religion. To me, it's simply the most thrilling amusement on earth. Still, I'm sorry——"

"You're not," Sheila retorted, unappeased. "And I'd like you better if you said so, honestly. *I'm* sorry I ever came in here at all. Good night."

She moved to the door; but softly and swiftly as a cat Bel sped after her and took her by the shoulder.

"Sheila, my dear, don't be a high-flown little fool," she said in her seductive voice that was seldom wasted on a woman.

"Oh, let me alone, I'm tired," Sheila murmured, and shook off the detaining hand, only to find it slipped through her arm.

"Come and make it up. Then I'll let you go," Bel cooed invitingly.

It was detestable; but Sheila was genuinely tired and too disgusted for further argument. Unresisting, and unresponsive, she allowed herself to be drawn back to the fire and gently pulled down into the chair.

"You're such a lovesome morsel of dignity and reserve," Bel went on, kneeling beside her and warming her hands. "It's quite an achievement to have drawn you out a little. I can't let you shut up again with a click. Besides, we must be friends *now!*"

Sheila, who was hardly attending, did not grasp the import of that last remark.

"I'm not altogether depraved, you know."

"I never said you were."

"But you thought so."

Sheila merely shook her head. She had no further desire to discuss Bel or her very mixed attributes; but, for Bel, there was no more congenial subject on earth.

"You *did* think so," she insisted, with untroubled conviction. "But I do try to be decent, up to my lights. Can't help it—can I?—if mine are candles and yours are stars? And I admit this beastly war *has* demoralized me badly. Your Mums talks of it as a 'refiner's fire'; but . . . I don't know. That sort of thing doesn't agree with everyone. It may exalt the good; but . . . I rather think it makes the bad worse."

Sheila nodded. "It finds us all out. It's burning away the husks of life and forcing us to be our real selves.—*My* real self, at this moment," she added lightly, "is a mere log of weariness. I must go now."

"Very well—go. Good night, dear."

Bel put up her face for a kiss; but Sheila was on her feet again. "*Will* you leave Mr. Seldon alone?" she said returning to her original attack.

"I'll try—just to please you! But you can't blame *me* if the man's a mere weather-cock."

"I do blame you—all along the line," Sheila answered with quiet obstinacy; and at last effected her escape.

But for all her weariness, sleep was long in coming. Though her lids were heavy, her brain was wide awake and haunted distractingly by visions of Bel; her smiling self-complacence, her graceful, studied poses, her serene assurance—cruelly emphasised—that no revelation of her intrinsic worthlessness would affect her dominion over Mark.

Was that true, Sheila wondered, feeling of a sudden very ignorant and limited—as Bel had said? Would it make no difference even if he knew all? Was a man's love so entirely a mixture of infatuation

and passion that the soul of a woman counted for next to nothing?

Personally, Sheila did not believe it; but she was too young, too untravelled in the heart's byways, to feel secure in that belief. She only saw Mark, her god among men, lured and held by this elf-maiden of a girl; fair without, hollow within. Mr. Seldon, too—in spite of all he had suffered, in spite of genuine love for herself—seemed powerless to hold his own against Bel. And was it only Bel? Was it only Mark and Seldon? Or, was their private tangle simply part of the cruel, primitive essence of things? Sheila lying there in the dark, pictured hundreds of Bels dragging down hundreds of Marks and Seldons; and her protective, mother-tenderness for the masculine half of creation, raged impotently against it all. One heard so much, in these outspoken days, about men ruining women. Was there not fully as much to be said about women ruining men? Between sleep and waking her mind dwelt long on this side of a question that touched her so nearly. The mixed emotions of the last few days and the need to keep them hidden, had put a severe strain on her. And closer contact with Bel seemed to have rubbed the bloom off life; to have shaken her faith in the nature of things——

Her heart, in its loneliness, yearned for the dear comrade-woman; mother, sister, and friend in one; who could light up even the dark places of life with the fire of her brave enthusiasm. Soon they would all be together, they three: while she, who was intrinsically one with them, remained out in the cold; and must so remain—as Bel had smilingly assured her—to the end of the chapter.

CHAPTER V

"And the land shall leave me or take, and the Woman shall take me or leave me. . . .
But Life shall hold me alive, and Death shall never deceive me,
As long as I walk in England, in the lanes that let me pass."

CHESTERTON.

IT was accomplished. The faith and courage of Helen Forsyth had reaped their due reward; and they three were together at last. But not yet under one roof. The instant Mark emerged from supposed extinction, Authority claimed him; and Helen rebelled a little, inevitably against cast-iron regulations that withheld her from taking immediate possession of her own.

Meanwhile she was thankful, on reaching the hospital, to find him in a small room with two other empty beds. Ignoring the chair that had been set for her, she knelt beside him, her face radiating a silent benediction.

Prostrate, paralysed, his reddish hair almost hidden by the cap-like bandage, he lay there smiling his queer, crooked smile and his lashes were wet with tears. When one or two of them escaped and ran down his cheek, she wiped them away with her handkerchief and leaning over him kissed his eyelids.

He frowned as if vexed at his own weakness, but she shook her head.

"We needn't think shame of them," she said, for her own were falling. "It's natural. Just the blessed reaction. Don't you remember your favourite bit of Blake? '"Damn" braces, "bless" relaxes.'"

He smiled and pressed the hand he was clinging to in a fashion that recalled nursery days when some nightmare had so shaken him that he must hold her to make sure she was really there. And to-day in this first, incredible hour of reunion, both felt unashamedly the childish need of that same reassurance.

As his hand clung to hers, so her eyes clung to his face; and she saw now that he was making a desperate effort to speak.

"No, no. Bad for you, beloved," she said. "I understand."

But he would not be baulked of achievement; so strong was the current of new life in his veins. And the words came at last; though, till they were out, he could not be sure whether sense or nonsense would emerge.

"M-Mother—Mums—Home!"

He brought them out, one by one; the last with triumphant emphasis and a stronger grip on her hand.

"Yes—home the first possible minute," she assured him. "A Nursing Home first, I'm afraid, for some time. We've been wondering if we could put off the operation till we get across, as it's been delayed so long already. The doctor here will see your head to-night and decide. Of course half our best men are on the spot. But it might keep us here weeks; and it's England you want, isn't it, darling,—and Bel?"

He nodded, then suddenly releasing her hand, he put his left arm round her drawing her down to him. . . .

He was still holding her thus when the inexorable knock sounded on the door.

That night it was decided that no harm would arise from a few days' delay: and Authority made arrangements accordingly; thrusting its ruthless arm once again between Helen and her son.

For Mark, the mere exigencies of travelling emphasised his own vexatious helplessness, so that he understood, for the first time, something of the monkish attitude towards the body as a despised and hampering burden, rather than the beautiful disciplined servant of the spirit: but he was cheered beyond measure, by the sight and smell of the sea and the faint salt of it on his lips. For the sea spelt England: and England—Bel; haloed and idealised, by this time, beyond the height of mortal woman. While he lay on deck, delighting in wind-driven clouds and wind-tossed waters, memories crowded thick upon him. . . .

He hated losing sight of Keith and his mother even for a few hours: but his spirits rose steadily as the steamer, mysteriously safe-guarded, nosed her way toward the cliffs of Home. It was still something of a wonder simply to be back again in the world of men; to see papers, as a matter of course, and to know more or less what was happening in that complex maze of trenches that now cleft France from the Vosges to the sea and changed the whole character of the War. Wounded officers, who had heard his

story, came up to congratulate him and stayed to tell their own experiences. It was good to hear them, though conversation was a distractingly one-sided affair: good to see, at last, the white cliffs of Kent, lit by a frail ray of winter sunshine; to glide up alongside the familiar quay with its cheering crowd, and to hear the rough speech of his own people. It was better still to watch Keith pushing his way through them all, with a new uprightness and a squarer set of his shoulders, though the weeks of anxious search had left their mark on his rugged face. And there, at his elbow, was "Mums" looking out eagerly for her "boy."

His glimpse of them was brief but reassuring. Then it was: "See you again in London": and for all he longed to speed straight to Wynchcombe Friars, the spell of the great grey city, throned upon its grey river, under a shifting pall of fog, penetrated, as never before, to the deep places of his imagination and his heart.

The squalor of her back alleys was shrouded in darkness. Her great thoroughfares were dimmed and emptier than of old. As they drove away from the station, ragged flakes of snow and sleet were falling, and sharp against a blurred background loomed the stately splendour of the Abbey, the Houses, and Big Ben. For him that shadowy mass of architecture possessed something of the sublimity and the aloofness of a great mountain range: and to-night, above all, it was a vision to lift the heart of one mere Englishman in thankfulness and praise. . . .

His destination was a Nursing Home for Officers in Park Lane—a paradise of ordered comfort and spotlessness and peace, where the hum of London's

unresting voice sounded scarcely louder than the breaking of waves upon a stony shore. Here his mother reappeared to bid him welcome and good night. She had found rooms, she told him, in a hotel close by: and—yes, Bel was downstairs waiting for permission to come up.

A quarter of an hour—no longer, the Nurse decreed. And presently she came—a vision supremely satisfying to the eye. Her simple, costly-looking coat and skirt were only a few shades darker than her hair. On the brim of her beaver hat rested one yellow velvet flower; and she wore her amber beads over a yellow blouse. Every detail had been carefully thought out; and the result, as she swiftly perceived, was very much to his taste.

But this new Mark, who in a few short months had plumbed the heights and depths of human experience, craved more from the woman he had been sedulously glorifying than perfect finish of colour and form. And he could neither utter that craving nor appraise her with the sugar-plum compliments she loved. He could only hold out his left hand and smile his crooked smile.

An attempt to speak her name produced only such a strange, unnatural sound that she winced, ever so slightly, and the blood mounted to his face.

Pricked with genuine pity and remorse she swept to him and caught his hand in both her own.

"Darling—darling, don't try," she said in her cooing voice of tenderness. "All in good time. You're a wonder and a miracle to be here at all."

Then—conquering his sudden painful shyness—he pulled her nearer; and, as she stooped to kiss him,

captured her with his arm. For the moment he asked nothing on earth but the sense of her living presence, the soft surrender of her lips. Ecstasy flowed through him: short-lived, but fiery sweet——

Loosening his hold, he pulled at her hat. She sat back on the low chair facing him, removed the hat, and considered it with critical approval.

"Bought for the occasion!" she explained. "Rather a gem, isn't it?"

He nodded, smiling, and fingering her beads; and she, suddenly slipping on to her knees, hid her face against him.

Comforted exceedingly, he caressed her hair, and found courage for a fresh effort to speak. This time he succeeded.

"Beautiful—my Bel," he said slowly.

She lifted her face and smiled at him: flushed but dry-eyed. "Yes—your Bel. And you're going to shake off this horror as soon as possible; so that we can stick to our original date in spite of the war and its abominations. There—I *must* go. I hear Nurse coming."

She picked up the precious hat and stood before the over-mantel pinning it on. Then she sighed.

"Oh, *won't* I be thankful when to-morrow's well over. Sleep sound, darling, and I'll hope to see you in the morning."

She kissed him again and vanished with a parting wave of the hand. And he lay a long while brooding on the day's events: his body too tired and his brain too full of impressions for coherent thought. . . .

Next morning, before the operation, he had a brief glimpse of her. Then his mother came, with Sheila

—graver, paler, and, in some indefinable fashion, lovelier than he seemed to remember her. But of late her image had been kept well in the background of his brain: and it smote him now the more poignantly as if in revenge.

His hand closed firmly on hers and kept it imprisoned, while she stood there smiling at him through tears. Yesterday's failure made him shy of attempting her name. His gaze travelled from her face to his mother's and back again: and at last he spoke.

"All my thanks—for Mums," he said and with an abrupt movement pressed her fingers to his lips.

Then he released them and her pale face glowed.

"Mark, don't thank me," she murmured. "It was simply . . . we were everything to each other, and it helped us to pull through. Some day when she's not there, I'll tell you just how splendid she was. And I want to hear about the Nun who wrote that letter. She must be a jewel. When all this is well over, we'll have a real long talk!"

And Mark, more than ever enamoured of her musical voice, felt ridiculously elated at the prospect.

Even this unsatisfactory lop-sided talk was over too soon: the eminent surgeon had arrived; and they must surrender him to the saving mercy of chloroform and the knife. Is the whole enlightened race of man ever anything but ungrateful to these grim agents of salvation—at least until the beloved is safe out of the toils?

Lady Forsyth's heart failed her badly as she stooped to kiss her son. But seeing the tense set of his lips, she spoke more bravely than she felt.

"We've no reason at all to feel nervous, darling,"

she said low in his ear. "I have Dr. Norton's word for it. He says your condition's excellent and it ought to be quite plain sailing. Keith is downstairs; and we won't leave till everything is well over. God keep you safe—till I see you again."

CHAPTER VI

". . . No longer can I cast
A glory round about this head of gold.
Glory she wears, but springing from the mould;
Not like the consecration of the past."

MEREDITH.

DR. NORTON proved no false prophet.

Ten days later a very much revived Mark lay propped up in bed, while his mother sat by him, reading aloud, with emphatic relish, an outspoken article from the *National Review*.

The loyal, universal confidence accorded, in August, to a Government mainly responsible for the failure to save Belgium, was already on the wane. The political leopard, it appeared, could not change his spots even to preserve the British Empire from ruin. Increasingly the note of criticism replaced the note of confidence: and to none did the change seem more ominous than to Helen Forsyth and her son. But for Mark, at the moment, no larger anxieties could cloud the joy of regaining his grip on life; of watching his mother's expressive face as she snapped the thread of a sentence to acclaim here or denounce there; till he longed for command of speech to lure her into one of their arguments that, for her, were at once an exasperation and a delight.

Words came more readily now; but still at times,

they played him ludicrous and disconcerting tricks, that were not always matter for mirth. Bel—whose sense of humour was an uncertain quantity—too often winced at them; and then they covered him with confusion or pricked him to momentary irritation with her. They would pass, he assured her, as the brain reasserted its full control. The fact that it had proved to be slightly torn would retard things a little; but already he began to move his right hand; and in time recovery would be complete. They must have patience: that was all.

She proclaimed herself a miracle of patience; but there were days when he suspected her of being faintly bored; when her cheerfully persistent injunction to "hurry up and get well" had, to his sensitive ear, an almost metallic ring. Work and the war and the strain of real suffering had wrought inner changes of which he became gradually aware. The fine film of hardness, that dismayed Lady Forsyth, had not been altogether dissolved even by those first wonderful days of reunion; and now when she spoke of painful things, it was fatally apparent to Mark.

He was, in fact, beginning to perceive the woman beneath the glamour; yet the glamour remained, in spite of disillusion. Only when he looked into the future, or was tired and alone, the old distracting doubts assailed him. For purposes of love-making she was inimitable. To that end, she was born. For the larger purposes of wifehood, motherhood, companionship:—well, he had chosen her and he must take his chance——

And all the while, he tried not to be aware that he was watching for one face, waiting for the "real long

talk" she had promised him. Others came with increasing frequency; but she never reappeared. What was wrong? The uncertainty grew distracting; but he felt reluctant to speak of her, these days; and when at last, he achieved a casual question to his mother, nervousness made it one of his failures.

"Where is—become—Colette?" was the conundrum that emerged.

"I wrote to her, dear," Lady Forsyth answered, pleased at his remembering. "But I haven't heard yet."

He frowned impatiently. "D-damn it! I mean—Sheila?"

Then he learnt that her mother had claimed her for work at Westover Court, where a number of half convalescent nervous cases were in need of massage and Mrs. Melrose was short of skilled hands.

"Sheila is quite wonderful at it," Lady Forsyth added. "A genuine gift. More magnetism than massage, I verily believe."

Mark smiled at her enthusiasm, but asked no more questions. His belated discovery must not be suffered to get out of hand. . . .

So far, he had been a very saint for patience. But as vigour increased, irritability increased also. In certain moods, the monotony, the dependence, the rubber-tyred routine of the hospital existence irked him to exasperation; and if he were alone with Keith he would let off steam, in an outburst of wholesome profanity.

He did his best not to upset the women; but when a rare fine day flung panels of sunshine across the carpet and a frolic wind set the blind-tassels tap-tapping on

the windows he felt like a caged thing. No garden here, as in France, where at least he could commune with trees and sky: and it was no garden he wanted now. It was the road or the heather underfoot; the wilds of Hampshire, the rolling hills of his native Argyll; the sea-salt and heather-fragrant air that, for him, was like no other air on earth. He wanted simply to walk and walk, world without end; only Bobs for company; Bobs, who most certainly was not forgetting his master, though he was accepting with true canine philosophy the homage paid him by the house of Russell.

One night he dreamed of a kingly tramp among the hills and glens beyond Inveraig: Keith walked beside him, while Bobs put the fear of God into rabbits, visible and invisible.

So vivid was the dream that he awoke with the dog's bark and Keith's voice sounding in his ears—woke to find he could scarcely shift himself in bed without help. The contrast jarred so painfully that he cursed that delusive dream and decided to ask a few straight questions when Dr. Norton came, if his unruly member would permit.

They had subjected him to a thorough overhauling the day before: but of information not a crumb could he extract from them, beyond vague encouragement and counsels of patience. And this morning he fared very little better at Dr. Norton's hands.

Norton was a lean tall man, with a humorous grey-green eye and, on occasion, a slightly caustic tongue. He had taken a great liking to this virile, sensitive patient of his; who could thoroughly enjoy a joke at his own expense. But, for all that, even

Mark's direct demand for enlightenment failed to entice him from the cautious reserve of his kind.

"My dear Sir Mark," he said, a gleam of sympathy in his grave eye, "it's hardly fair to fling leading questions at men whose reputation might not be worth an hour's purchase if they took to scattering inaccurate prophecies among their patients! The damage to your brain was slight considering what it might have been. With that well-seasoned puttee for a first aid bandage, it's a miracle you didn't die of septic meningitis within a week. The main thing to guard against now is nerve trouble: if you let yourself get worried or uncontrolled. With luck we shall have you out of bed in a week. But it may be more like a month before we can let you out of this."

"Oh—*damn*!" The "good old word of sin" seldom failed him at command.

"Quite so," Norton remarked in his even voice. "It's beastly having to lie up when you don't feel ill. At the same time——"

"Yes, of course—all those other chaps," Mark broke in, feeling suddenly very much ashamed of himself. "Lucky enough getting away—intact. I won't worry. I'll—what's it they say out there—carry on!"

But for some reason—whether because of his dream or because of Dr. Norton's guarded statement, that morning marked a point from which his hopefulness flagged; and the atmosphere about him seemed to suffer some indefinable change that gave Norton's injunction not to worry a slightly satirical tang.

He became too keenly conscious of sympathy in the

air; and the more tactfully it was implied, the worse it jarred. His kind, attentive Nurse seemed suddenly kinder, more attentive. His mother's lively humour sounded, at times, a trifle strained. More than once he caught his mother gazing at him with a yearning wistfulness that he had either not noticed or not encountered before. She managed to laugh it off; but it haunted him afterwards.

Worse than all, he detected a fine shade of difference in Bel: at times a hint of constraint in her manner that he tried to dismiss as pure fantasy; at times, a passion of affection, very rare with her. There was less of mere lovers' talk between them now: and in the intervals, a paucity of common interests was revealed. Very often she would read to him; and her visits were growing less regular. Some days she did not come at all; but sent a hurried affectionate note of excuses, lean diet for a man who needed companionship as never before.

And Sheila, except for an occasional letter, appeared to have deserted him utterly.

He put up with this state of things for a week: during which time his arm and speech made good progress towards recovery. Then, suddenly, his patience gave out and he decided to tackle Keith, the only one whose bearing had suffered no perceptible change.

Keith had been away for a few days at Montrose; but he was due in Town that morning: and he came straight from the station to Park Lane.

He looked noticeably tired and worn: but Mark, just then, was fiercely intent on his own determination to be rid of half truths,

"You—you damned lucky devil!" he broke out, holding on to Keith's hand and searching his eyes hungrily for knowledge withheld. "Scotland—mountains—the sea! And I lie here—cursing. How much taller—" the word eluded him and gesture failed—"Oh, *you* know . . . yard measure—longer? They won't tell me. Those infernal doctors. I'm—no coward. Let's have the damage straight. My legs . . . rotten, useless. Don't improve."

Keith shook his head, pain unconcealed in his eyes. Then he sat down by the bed and faced the ordeal thrust upon him.

"The chances are—they won't—improve," he said slowly. "That's the damage, Mark. Your spine."

Mark set his teeth and was silent. The breath of tragedy had clean blown out the rushlight of impatience. Keith hoped that Helen would never see him look as he looked then.

"I gather they didn't mend matters . . . dragging you to that farm," Keith went on in his low, contained voice. "Not their fault, poor fellows. Very bad ground, Macgregor said; and they were wounded and under fire. But the result is—a lesion——"

"Lesion," Mark repeated frowning with the effort of thought. "Medical stuff. In plain English . . . I'm done for . . . physically. That it?"

Keith was silent a moment. "That's . . . about it: so far as they can tell at present. But there's just a possibility of gradual improvement. A very slow business. And, at best, Dr. Norton fears recovery would only be partial——"

"Thanks very much,"

The quiet courtesy of his tone pierced Keith to the heart. He would infinitely sooner have heard Mark swear. The swearing was bound to come, soon or late, and it would be a relief for both.

At present, he merely closed his eyes and lay silent a long, long while, facing naked and unlovely facts with his vivid, forward-looking artist's brain. . . .

Some fool had once said: "*Never* is a long word"; but no word ever coined was interminable enough to suggest the unnumbered army of days that threatened him—that was the literal effect—between seven and twenty and the merciful end of all. Try as he would, he could not believe in it—yet.

And the others—they had known it a week or more. It must have been hell for them; and it explained everything. Most startlingly, it explained—Bel. If she had seemed, on occasion, to weary of an invalid lover, what manner of use would she have for a husband chained to a wheeled chair? Had he any shadow of right to hold her—now?

Unable to endure the torment of thought, he opened his eyes. Keith still sat there, one elbow on the bed; his hand across his forehead shutting out the vision of Mark's face.

"Keith, old man," he said, and Keith looked up with a start. "Don't you worry. I can—stick it. Others, worse off—eh? Half a life—half a loaf—" He struggled to complete the connection; and failing, tried to smile. "Mother?" he asked sharply and Keith drew in his lips.

"No thought of herself. Only you!"

Then came the word he hardly dared speak. "Bel? She knows too?"

"Yes. She knows."

Another long pause: but he forced himself to go on.

"Keith—can I? Ought I—? Must I lose *every* thing?"

The words came out in a sudden rush.

"That depends—" Keith answered with slow emphasis — "on her. Naturally—she is free, if she chooses. But she has every right to refuse freedom; to wait . . . on the chance. . . . Picture your mother in such a case."

Mark pictured her; and knew very well that no lover of hers, so placed, would have need to fear the double loss. But Bel—? How imperfectly he knew her, how utterly unsure he was of her even now.

"Why did they keep it from me?" he asked irrelevantly.

"They were afraid for your head, till the three weeks were up."

"Weeks?—what are weeks?" Mark murmured. "Look here—they must leave me alone a bit. Tell them. An hour or two. I'll ring."

"Very well. I will come again, this afternoon."

Keith held out his hand and their mutual grasp supplied all racial disabilities.

They left him alone the greater part of that morning; alone with the news that had come down on him like a guillotine snapping his life in two. It struck him, in his first access of bitterness, that the guillotine would have been the more merciful fate——

But the one practical problem of the moment was Bel. It amazed and hurt him to realise how little he could foretell her line of action in this cruel dilemma.

Almost, he could see her rising, dramatically, superbly, to the heroic plane. The difficulty was to see her keeping it up. Throughout all her past "phases" he detected that same incapacity running like a fatal thread. Though it pleased her to pose as a rebel, her instinctive skill lay, rather, in graceful evasion of circumstances that threatened to prove too strong for her. Would she regard a crippled husband as a circumstance that called for graceful evasion? That question she alone could answer. And how—and when was he to ask it?

He could not yet write; and, like all strong natures, he inclined to the spoken word if anything unpleasant must be done; but he still felt quite unfit for the strain of a scene that might end disastrously. He would of a certainty be tripped up by egregious verbal lapses, that, at such a moment, would be intolerable.

If she came, however, he must see her and take his chance.

She did not come; and the uncertainty, following on the shock of knowledge, was none too good for his nerves. Dr. Norton advised a sleeping draught that afternoon and another at night.

These gave him brief and merciful respite from the torment of thought: but morning brought fresh realisation, fresh perplexity. It also brought a letter from Bel.

He scarcely dared open it. Did she know that he knew? And was she too great a coward to face his pain?

Her short note answered neither question.

"Darling Man," she wrote, "this is to tell you that

Harry and I must run down to Folkestone for three or four days on account of her work. A big meeting, for one thing; and she wants me to speak. I'm rather keen about it. Not so sure I haven't found my real vocation at *last*. I looked in yesterday evening to say good-bye: but Nurse said you were asleep and not on any account to be disturbed. So the kisses must be stored up for a few days. Forgive this hurried scrawl. I'll write again from Folkestone. Always your so loving Bel."

He read that "hurried scrawl" several times over without arriving at any clear conclusion, except the obvious one that matters must stand over till her return; unless he could bring himself to write through his mother, an expedient that did not commend itself, except as a last resort.

CHAPTER VII

"God's own gifts
Have a devil for the weak.
Yea the very force that lifts
Finds the vessel's secret leak."

MEREDITH.

BEL'S maiden speech at Folkestone proved an unqualified success. Her sweet, well-modulated voice, hardly suitable for platform purposes, carried well enough in Mrs. Langton's double drawing-room where some sixty ardent feminists and pacifists, of both sexes, were gathered together mainly for the glorification of woman—as martyr in chief of man's recurrent lust for slaughter, and as the normal promoter of peace between nations, whose eyes were blinded with blood and wrath.

Characteristically, she had concealed from Mark the real nature of the meeting and the subject-matter of her own speech. This last, as may be supposed, emanated from Harry, though declaimed and decorated by Bel. The Utopian vision of universal peace had caught hold of her imagination. The fact that the world's harmony spelt comfort and material prosperity made a direct appeal to her practical brain: and now the shadow of her own private tragedy seemed more than ever to justify her leaning towards those

who denounced as criminal the ruthless indefinite prolongation of war.

"Woman and War";—the antithesis lent itself to a rhetorical opening, a study in contrasts: and Bel made the most of it. War destroys life; woman creates and beautifies it. War is brutality and coarseness *in excelsis;* woman is all tenderness and grace. War stands for hate; woman for love. War degrades; woman lifts and inspires. The scope for contrast was infinite if not always exact. It would quite spoil the effect to admit that there were scores of women who had neither the will nor the power to lift and inspire: scores, like herself, for whom love was war, as fierce and unsparing as any conflict on earth. Her concern was not with awkward realities, but with the success of her speech; and from these lofty opening flourishes, she swung downward to more practical considerations. She reminded them that the patriotic spirit in which the women of England had worked and endured, through these first bewildering and terrible months of war, must assuredly win for them the all-round equality, economic and political, out of which they had been cheated for so long. . . .

There spoke the soul of Harry through the voice of Bel, vitiating fine service rendered by a perpetual eye on the ballot-box of the future. But, for the moment, even the obsession of years paled before her consuming admiration of Bel in a new rôle. Her address had been reserved as the finishing touch to a great occasion, the inauguration of a movement that promised far-reaching results. For three quarters of an hour she held her audience—their eyes no less than their

brains; and the culminating burst of applause was fully as much a tribute to the speaker as to the speech: of which fact Bel was radiantly aware.

A select company of the audience remained for tea and talk. Fads and theories flourished. Compliments rained. And Bel was never happier than in the limelight of uncritical praise. Between Harry's open adoration and the joy of achievement, she was swept for the time being, right away from the perplexities and tragic issues of her lover's return.

It needed only the unexpected appearance of Rex Maitland, and his discreet adulation, to complete her enjoyment. But his polite enquiries about Mark elicited brief and evasive answers. She had not yet found courage to tell any one the truth, only excepting Harry, whose honest sympathy for the man in no way affected her inevitable opinion as regards Bel.

Maitland was among the still further selected few whom Mrs. Langton entertained at dinner: and Bel—in an apricot-yellow gown and her leopard-skin cloak was admittedly the heroine of the evening. The whole affair was an experience after her own heart; marred only by that hovering shadow of tragedy that waited to engulf her when solitude and darkness left her at its mercy.

Alone at last in her bedroom, it engulfed her very thoroughly, blotting out her tinsel triumphs, thrusting her in upon herself, demanding decisions.

For nearly two weeks she had deliberately evaded the issue. Now the time for evasion was over.

Mark must already know his fate: and for the last few days she had been half hoping, half fearing that he would write, through his mother, offering to release

her from their engagement. Not a word had come; and to-morrow. . . .

Mechanically discarding her robe of triumpn, she slipped on a padded dressing-gown and sank into a comfortable chair by the fire to confront the situation. No comfort there; look whichever way she would, it was all cruel and horrible: fresh proof that the Fates were in league against her, as always. In her case, pity for the broken or imperfect creatures of earth was not akin to love, but to repulsion. It was one of the chief horrors of this horrible war that it would fill the world with hundreds of maimed and disfigured men; perpetual reminders of an event which all sane people must surely crave to forget.

And now—Mark would be one of them: Mark, her strong, splendid lover!

To marry him would be to live with a perpetual reminder of the thing she abhorred: to spend her days either uncompanioned or tied to his chair. No seasons in Town: no social triumphs. She could not see Mark submitting to an invalid existence in London. He would cling more obstinately than ever to Wynchcombe Friars. So would the very position and affluence she craved be robbed of its chief attraction. She had enough imagination to foresee it all far too clearly; and the more she looked at the prospect the less she liked it. The hope of gradual improvement held out by Dr. Norton, was too distant, too uncertain to mitigate the tragic actuality that lay like a stone upon her heart. For the great man had told her plainly that if, in six months, there was no change of condition, the case would be hopeless. He considered improvement possible; but was too cautious

to say more, or to prophecy how far it might ultimately go. And vague possibilities were not enough for Bel. Suppose she did wait six months and then . . . ?

With a shiver of misery she leaned forward, covering her face; and tears, that came so rarely, fell from between her fingers. Too well she knew that the compound of passion and sentiment which she called "love," would never stand the strain; and, genuinely though she sorrowed for Mark, she was many degrees more sorry for herself. The root of her own tragedy lay in the fact that now—for the first time in her varied dealings with men—her heart was seriously involved; and its promptings did not agree with the promptings of her brain.

Hitherto it had been an underling; obedient to the dictates of self-interest, more becomingly designated common-sense. It had played no leading part in her swift, dramatic conquest of Mark; in the keen pleasure, known only to her kind, of luring him from a girl lovelier and worthier than herself, and with hardly a grain of coquetry in her composition. Lady Forsyth's obvious disapproval had been but one stimulus the more: and, her head having guided her into a delectable harbour, she had felt, at last, sufficiently secure to let her heart have its way—with disastrous result.

For, in her own fashion, she loved Mark now, more deeply and genuinely than she would have believed possible that day at Inveraig, when she had rejoiced mainly in the capture of a strong man, against his mother's wish and probably against his own cooler judgment. Her triumph had been complete. She had done more than capture him; she had held him;

and now—no denying it—he very ceftainly held her.

In his case, absence, and the letters that revealed unsuspected heights and depths in him, had served to strengthen that hold; while her own letters were having the opposite effect on him. Nor had Mark been mistaken in thinking that she might rise, momentarily to the heroic plane. For a few exalted days she had seen herself in the grand rôle; and had almost believed in her power to carry it through. But Nemesis pursued her: the Nemesis of her own nature. Invariably her high impulses had been short-lived; rootless things, like seeds dropped on stony ground: and this one had proved no exception to the rule.

Hovering to-night at the cross-roads, vowed to a decision before she slept, Bel discovered to her cost that this, the one great choice of her life, was decided already by the hundreds of minor, careless decisions that had gone before. Since she had never yet, in small matters, chosen the path of hardness or unselfishness, so she could not choose it now. The Greeks, as usual, were in the right of it: character is fate.

For years, unconsciously, and with keen enjoyment, Bel Alison had been building up her own tragedy. Now it turned and overwhelmed her.

But she did not long indulge in the futility of tears. Very soon her practical mind was at work again devising pleas that would throw a becoming light on her quite justifiable, if unheroic, refusal to face marriage with a husband who must either hamper her at every turn, or be a cipher in her life. The main points in her eyes were to do the thing gracefully, to preserve at least a semblance of being in the right, and, if possible,

to avoid witnessing the pain she could not choose but inflict. For that reason, his silence troubled her. It implied either that he meant to do the thing personally or—not to do it at all. In which case, she would be driven to take the initiative. That unpleasant possibility swung her back to her original lament. It was all cruel and horrible: no escape anywhere from pain for herself or him. She felt helpless, like a squirrel in a revolving cage.

At least she must see him to-morrow and chance the result.

"Better write and be done with it, Mavourneen," was Harry's counsel next day, when Bel suggested a train that would allow time to "look up Mark." "It's a bitter business for the poor fellow losing everything at a stroke; and I can't believe he's the man to try and hold you in spite of all. But if he gets making love to you—well! there's no knowing what might happen. And there's only one end to the business that's fair on you. Short and sharp's the kindest way of it, Bel. It'll only be worse for the both of you if you let things drag on. Cruel hard enough as it is."

Bel admitted the hardship—and the risk: but she insisted on the earlier train; and wired to Mark her probable time of arrival at the Home. Marriage or no marriage, she wanted simply to feel his arms round her, his lips on hers again.

At first sight of him, her heart contracted so sharply that she had need of Harry's warning and vehement conviction to fortify her own resolve. They had dressed him and moved him into an arm-chair by the fire. A fur rug covered his legs. The bandage had

given place to a velvet football cap that hid the shaven patch on his head. Altogether, he looked more normal than she had seen him yet. But the change that smote her was in his face; the look of his eyes as if some inner light had gone out.

Those first few days of awful realisation as regards himself and bewildering uncertainty as regards Bel had told upon him visibly. The strong outline of his chin and jaw seemed sharper. When he was not talking or smiling the strained expression of his lips was pitiful to see. And his greeting, for the moment, unnerved her utterly.

"Bel,—at last!" he cried, a queer ring in his voice, and held out his hand.

She came to him swiftly and half flung herself on him kneeling beside his chair. Very seldom in her life had she felt tongue-tied: but just then speech seemed the last impossibility. And when she closed her eyes the feel of his rough Norfolk coat against her cheek carried her sharply back to days of cool, assured conquest at Inveraig. If *only* she had known!——

Very sorely she began to wish that she had followed Harry's advice. For, though head governed heart, she was, like most egoists, a sentimentalist at the core. Evenly balanced on the knife-edge between pain and pleasure, she leaned against her lover, expecting, yet half dreading the word that he, poor man, was doing his utmost to speak.

So far he had said nothing to any one of the facts wrung from Keith a few days ago. With his mother there had been no need. Neither could have borne it: and their understanding was complete. The mute

sympathy of his Nurse no longer jarred: and his few recent visitors had continued to maintain a tactful silence. Detailed talk on the subject would hurt like salt on an open wound. It would also involve the inevitable scene, so distressful to his shaken nerves; and still, at critical moments, there lurked the dread of making ludicrous mistakes.

But the main stumbling-block was Bel herself. Her flight to Folkestone—he did not believe in the importance of that meeting—had convinced him that retreat was simply a prelude to graceful acceptance of her freedom. Yet here she was, incalculable as ever, making passionate love to him: her lips mutely attesting, "I am yours, in spite of all!"

Every minute of silence, every fresh kiss, made things harder for Mark. The mere glamour of her most strangely out-lasted his own clearer vision. After four of the worst days he had ever lived through, it was undeniably refreshing, if only because it made no demands on the higher centres of his brain and soul. But it engendered neither true emotion nor response. It was a pure anodyne; and as such he frankly recognised it.

Conversely, Bel's emotion had so genuine a ring that it set him wondering had he after all, misjudged her? Were there hidden deeps in her that this sharp test might reach and bring to light? In that case it were hard to put her aside in the hour of his own greatest need for the best that woman can give; harder still to resist her in an appealing vein.

He was mentally unstrung—and he knew it. Not otherwise could her mere genius for love-making override his deep and real conviction that in freedom

from her spell lay his sole chance of salvation. That very conviction made resistance seem unchivalrous; and he felt utterly unfit for the emotional strain of a dramatic scene, such as she would instinctively make out of a noble resolve to devote herself to a crippled husband. By one of life's ironic twists their positions appeared to be reversed.

It was not in him to conceive that she was merely indulging herself to the full because this must be the end; because, with the innate perversity of her kind she had never loved him better than now, when her will was set to give him up.

Mark himself, with the deeper, ingrained perversity of human nature, felt a sudden distaste for this exuberance of sentiment, which thwarted his fixed intent and seemed tacitly to rebuke the secret defection of his heart. He began to think the thing would have to be written after all. In any case he needed time to readjust his mind in view of her possible refusal to be set free.

To-morrow—perhaps. Any idea of speaking to-day was "off." . . .

She released him at last, and sat back in his mother's low chair; her ringed hand resting close to his arm.

"Well, fire away," he said in his natural manner. "I want to know—all that—" a gesture filled the gap. "Is the latest thing in . . . vocations going to be a thundering success?"

She smiled at the recollection.

"It started well anyway. Compliments were flying."

"What subject?"

"Harry's pet subject, of course! Chiefly glori-

fication of ourselves. But we women *do* get the kicks in war time and precious few of the ha'pence!" Though she spoke lightly, a shade of bitterness crept into her tone. "What harm if we make little tinsel crowns for ourselves just to keep up our spirits!"

Then, sheering away as from the edge of a precipice she entertained him with thumb-nail sketches of Mrs. Langton and her friends and with a judicious selection of their flying compliments to herself. The longer she stayed, the harder it became to get up and leave him—for the last time. She felt convinced now, that he would not speak; and she did not mean to see him again.

At last, somehow, she was on her feet, saying she must go; and when she stooped to kiss him, he looked searchingly into her eyes.

"Badly bored—are you?—by your invalid lover?" he asked, probing her on impulse; but she managed to laugh it off.

"Boring people is not one of his talents!" she said lightly, and leaned her head against him.

"To-morrow?" he said in her ear. And she, humanly inconsistent—could not bear that her last word to him should be a lie. So, for answer, she kissed him lingeringly, and made haste to be gone.

On the threshold she turned, for a last look. But sudden tears blinded her; and, with a flutter of her hand she left him.

Arrived at the flat, she found supper ready and Harry impatient, more from anxiety than anything else. Even now she did not feel quite secure about

Bel. No one ever did. It was perhaps half the secret of her power.

"Well?" she asked abruptly. Bel shook her head. "He never said a word."

Crouching on the hearth-rug she drew off her gloves and held her chilled hands to the blaze.

Harry's eyes scrutinised her fire-lit face. "Perhaps he doesn't mean to."

"Oh—I don't know. But—I *can't* go on——"

"Of course you can't. It's horribly unfair on you. You must write yourself, Mavourneen. Do it to-night; and get it over."

Bel shivered. "I suppose—I must. But it seems so ungracious coming from me. And . . . it's not only him. It's the whole thing——"

Her voice broke suddenly and she sank on to the floor, sobbing passionately, her face hidden in the empty arm-chair.

Quick as thought Harry was beside her, removing her hat, clinging to her, murmuring endearments; to all of which Bel submitted without response.

"You're tired, my precious, and the strain of it all has upset your nerves. It won't feel half so bad once you've got it over. You shall have this room to yourself after supper and I'll post it the minute it's written. Cheer up and eat something before it all gets cold. Your poor old Harry will be ever so good to you——"

Bel raised her head suddenly and shook off the clinging hands. "Oh, let me alone! You're not a *bit* sorry really. You only want me for yourself. But I'm bound to marry—I *must* marry. You know that. Yet you always try to prevent me. If you hadn't

made such an unholy fuss about Geoffrey, we might have been quite happy together now in Australia. He was a good fellow anyway; and I would have been spared—*all this*. Now I've tasted the best and I'll have to swallow the second best, with my eyes open and my heart locked up. It's evidently not safe, even to fall in love with one's affianced husband. God knows I've had enough of tragedy——"

With a superbly dramatic gesture she swept to her feet and left the discomfited Harry kneeling ignominiously by an empty chair.

But if Harry's devotion was deep, her temper was short. "And sometimes I think I've had enough of *you*, Bel," she flung out, scrambling ungainly from her knees. "I, that have loved you and slaved for you—goodness knows why. For all your sweetness, you're selfish, heartless, ungrateful——"

She broke off, for Bel had vanished into her room and locked the door.

In her own time, she reappeared—dignified, unapproachable and polite. But before their half-cold meal was over, dignity had thawed; Harry's temper had evaporated and Bel had talked herself into the belief that her latest evasion was mainly prompted by consideration for Mark. Since she could not rise to his level, it were kinder to leave him than to drag him down. It was a singularly sustaining belief and it made her ungracious letter much easier to write.

Harry, as good as her word, took a bundle of pamphlets to read by the kitchen fire, leaving her alone.

After a little preliminary pacing and framing of sentences, Bel sat down to her task, steeled outwardly

and composed. Harry was right. Once the thing was done, past undoing, the worst wrench would be over.

"My darling Mark," she began in her firm, clear hand. "I can write that truthfully, in spite of what I am going to say. It's not lack of love that forces me to do this hateful thing. It's lack of something much bigger, which you possess and I most certainly don't. I knew, the minute I saw your face, that they had told you. It's the cruelest, bitterest blow that could have fallen on a man like you. To say I'm sorry would be simply a travesty of what I feel about it. And you'll understand now what sort of a purgatory *I've* been going through this last two weeks. Let that be my excuse—if you admit any.

"Mark—I didn't properly love you at Inveraig, but I do now. And yet—I *can't* marry you. No use pretending. I couldn't go through the pain and strain of it even for the finest man I've ever known.

"I told you, when first this Inferno began, that you were too big for a mere Bel; that in spite of it I couldn't let you go. Now, *because* of it, I must. This war has shrivelled up all I ever possessed in the way of a soul. But it seems to have made you stand out bigger than before. I believe that even this fiendish stroke of Fate will only crush you for a time. You'll override it. You and your astonishing mother. Perhaps even wring some good out of it. That would simply drive me to the other extreme. People ought *not* to accept and glorify horrors like this. It's all wrong. Simply encourages Kings and politicians to wallow in wholesale murder for their own ends.

"But this is heresy to you; so no more. If you hate reading this letter, please believe I've hated writing it. I thought you might speak this afternoon. But I expect it was too hard for you, poor boy. And it's really kinder on my part to do it this way, even though it *seems* to put me in an ungracious position. If I saw you again, I might give way after all, in spite of myself. But it *wouldn't last.* A worse tragedy for you. At least I'm sparing you that. And I'm not returning your ring. I feel sure you would like me to keep it with your letters, as a remembrance of the one *real* phase in my rather artificial life.

"Will you miss me tremendously, I wonder? But it's no use thinking of that now. It's all cruel and horrible for both of us.

"If you ever hear of me marrying, you'll know it is simply a business arrangement—and no doubt you'll be very sorry for the man. Enough of this. Good-bye. Your unworthy but not unloving Bel."

There—it was done, even to the straight thick line under her signature with a loop at one end. She forced herself to read it through, with a critical detachment, and decided that it could not well be improved upon. Even the ungraceful thing, she had managed to do gracefully. There was a gleam of comfort in that. She felt half tempted to show it to Harry; but refrained. Harry was allowed to run out with it, however, though her cough was troublesome and a fine cold rain was falling.

Alone again, Bel sat down by the fire and tried not to be aware of a chill emptiness at her heart. . . .

It was a sharp pang, this parting: the sharpest she

by his passing passion for Bel. It belonged to the depths; and there it had lain hidden, like a jewel in a mine. Once he was blind. Now he saw. War and its vicissitudes had effectually burnt away the husks and left the real man—battered, enlightened, enlarged. . . .

His sole ray of light, since the blow fell, had been one of Sheila's rare letters, written directly she heard that he knew the truth. Short and simple as it was, Mark found in every line of it the inexpressible fragrance of her spirit, the sure delicate touch of the healer on his hidden wound. It had given him a passing uplift, a glimpse of what life might be when the fog had cleared. At present, it seemed to be choking the life out of him, converting all his strength to weakness, his blood to gall.

Sheila wrote that she was still very much tied with work at Westover. Mr. Nacnair had been angelic about coming down and giving her first-hand news; but the moment it was possible, she would fly up to London for a glimpse of them both.

And on the morning after Bel's return—just as Mark was beginning to wonder at her non-appearance—the door opened to admit Lady Forsyth and Sheila, in squirrel furs, with a bunch of violets in her coat.

"Sheila!" he exclaimed, startled, yet frankly overjoyed. "Lord—it's like—seeing you suddenly—like a breath of Hampshire in this confounded London. I'd pretty well given you up."

"I've been trying to come for nearly a week. —True." She nodded, beaming on him and unfastening her violets while she talked. "It seemed hopeless. Then suddenly, to-day, I saw a free space ahead.

There was no time to cry, 'Look out!' So I just flew off and nipped into a kind train. And these"—she held out her violets—"are for you. I wanted to bring a sheaf of Father's special chrysanthemums. But I'd have lost the train."

"I prefer these," he said, and under pretence of sniffing them he touched them with his lips. "Fasten them—will you? I'm no better than an overgrown infant."

She shook her head at the faint note of bitterness. "A very capable infant! And your precious right hand's ever so much better. There! They look lovely."

For answer, he merely glanced from the flowers to her face. Lady Forsyth, standing near the window, watched the little scene with a yearning ache at her heart. Now she came forward and patted Mark's shoulder.

"You shall have her to yourself," she said, "for a real long talk. I'll do dragon downstairs and keep Londoners at bay!"

"That's good."

Mark's tone was gravely content. Reaching out, he drew a low chair nearer to the fire and to himself. "Sit—Mouse," he said, as his mother moved away. "Take off your coat. Look as if—you'd come to stay."

She obeyed, more gladly than he knew, and, sitting down by him, drew a khaki sock out of her bag. "You must excuse," she said smiling. "We're as bad as the French Revolution, these days! I'm more or less responsible for Ralph's men. They feel the cold cruelly, poor dears! And I don't get overmuch time

now. Mums looks rather strained and tired, doesn't she?"

Mark nodded. "It's been cruel hard on her—this business. But she's come through it all . . . 'm what's the confounded word?—a heroine. Has she said much to you?"

"Not much. She knows I understand. We came very close together . . . before."

Mark leaned forward.

"You know, you promised you'd tell me . . . all that. And then—you never came!"

"Dear, I couldn't," she said very low to the heel of her sock.

He watched her a while in silence; approving the clear, delicate outline of her profile, the soft-toned blue of her blouse, and the old lace collar he had given her two years ago. He knew now how impermissibly he had been craving to see her. . . .

"Well, as you *have* turned up, at last," he said, abruptly breaking the silence, "tell . . . all about it now. I'm dead sick of myself."

And she told. . .

For nearly an hour they were left in peace. Not since that long-ago talk on the terrace, when she had surprised him by denouncing Bel, had they talked so intimately or at such length; and for Mark it was the most satisfying hour he had known since his return. Both of them, unsuspected by each other, clung rather desperately to "Mums" as the one topic on which they could safely draw near together. Then Sheila wanted to hear about Sœur Colette. This was not easy matter for Mark, but he achieved it, after a fashion. He was describing his own abortive

attempt to thank the devoted little nun at parting, when there came a knock at the door.

It was the maid with two letters for Mark. With a start—half relief, half vexation—he recognised Bel's writing.

"May I?" he asked.

And Sheila, rising casually, went over to the window that looked across the Park. This quiet hour together had been so rare and perfect a gift from the blue that she could hardly endure to watch him read a love-letter from Bel. That the girl could dream of leaving him in his helplessness never so much as entered her head.

A smothered curse startled her and she turned sharply.

"Mark!" she cried, an irrepressible ring of tenderness in her tone; but he scarcely heard her.

The Mark of five minutes earlier—her Mark—had vanished. The man she confronted was of Bel's making. He had tossed his letter on to his elbow-table. He sat looking straight before him, his face set and stern.

"Oh—*what* is it?" she asked, rooted to the spot by a feeling that she ought not to be there. No one ought to see him suffering so. But Mark, dashed from his haven of content by a great wave of anger and disgust, was past troubling about any human presence.

"She . . . has no further use for me.—That's all," he said, as if he were speaking into vacancy. "And yesterday I was fool eno' . . . Quite a . . . masterly composition!"

Could Bel have heard that last she would have felt punished indeed. But it was Sheila who heard it—

Sheila who stood grasping the window-sill, swept by a tempest of anger scarcely less than his own.

"Oh—she's a coward—a coward!" The words flashed out involuntarily; and he seemed suddenly to be aware of her.

"You tender-hearted Mouse," he said, in a changed voice. "You . . . don't understand, eh? But . . . it's natural enough. Inevitable. No one . . . but Mums could be expected . . . to have any use for me —now."

To that tragic remark Sheila could find no answer. Besides, she was fighting back her tears and wondering desperately, ought she perhaps, to speak of what she knew? Would it give him the smallest consolation? Was it fair to kick even Bel when she was down—Bel, who had taken her all? Fair, or not, the thing was not in Sheila's nature. She was human enough to wish that Mark could know—now. But she was not the one to tell him.

"Thank God—for Mums," she said softly, after a long pause; and he bowed his head in heartfelt acquiescence.

The strained hardness had gone from his face. But the irony of the whole situation was piercing his heart. Sheila—who would have been staunch through thick and thin—here alone with him, almost within arm's length, yet irrevocably, eternally out of reach; lost to him through his own blind folly. If ever mortal man endured the torment of Tantalus it was Mark Forsyth in that hour of bewildered anger and pain.

Sheila, believing him heart-broken, remained near the window, seeking some inadequate word of comfort, and finding none. Instinct told her that, for the

moment, silence was best. Probably he was not even aware of her: while she, startled out of her stoic self-repression, had never been so intimately, so poignantly aware of him.

Unconsciously he had clenched his left hand until the knuckles stood out sharp and white. He sat staring into the fire with a fixed unseeing look. At intervals his eyebrows twitched nervously; and sudden fear seized her lest this blow had fallen on him before he was fit for the strain.

"Mark," she said at last, very gently, and came closer to him now. "It simply . . . bewilders me; and it has come at such a cruel moment. But you mustn't let—things upset you too much. Would you rather be alone?"

To her surprise he flung out his hand and grasped her wrist.

"No—no. Don't *you* leave me!"

Was it fancy,—or was there an under-note of fear in his tone? The mere possibility pierced her heart.

"Sit down—please," he said abruptly, and released her. "You've come all this way and I've been simply——"

He checked himself, and was thankful that she would suppose he had forgotten a word. "I've been—looking forward to it for so long. I'll be rotten company. But do stay. . . ."

He let out a great sigh and she sat by him as before; but the spell of their happy intercourse was broken. Bel had come upon the scene, and, as usual, had spoilt everything.

"I think," she said, "you ought to lie back and rest a little. Would you prefer . . . shall I read?"

"Do. I'd love it."

"What have you got here? . . . Roman Rolland?"

"Yes: a new one—the '*Michel Ange.*' It's splendid."

He indicated the page; but first she must arrange his chair and cushions at a restful slope. Leaning back he gazed up at her. For a mere instant his eyes lingered in hers, that had the clear depth and quiet of a mountain lake.

"Clever Mouse!" he said, in a voice of lazy content. "And look here, not a word to Mums. She'd rage. We'll have our afternoon in peace; and I'll tell her tonight. Go ahead."

Pocketing Bel's letter, he closed his eyes; and Sheila, between the sentences, could scrutinise his face. Cheek-bones and jaw and the fine strong curve of the eye-bone still stood out too sharply; and she noted with a pang the strained corners of his mouth. Beneath his surface composure she detected unmistakable signs of jarred nerves—signs she was learning to know too well—and a great longing came over her to soothe him with the touch of her skilled fingers over his forehead and head. But the very intensity of her feeling made her shrink from an offer that would otherwise have been a mere matter of course.

Meantime she must give her attention to Michael Angelo——

And it was so that Lady Forsyth found them when she came to carry Sheila off for lunch.

After his prescribed rest, they returned and had their afternoon in peace. Though Mark's natural cheerfulness was still shadowed by his calamity, Sheila—seeing what she had seen—marvelled at the controlled ease

of his manner. And few could estimate better the manifold difficulties of self-control.

The moment of parting put an almost equal strain on both.

"Come again soon, Mouse," he said, with a brave show of lightness that wrung her heart. "It's done me good—a breath of country air."

She promised to come, when stress of work allowed, and she frankly returned the pressure of his hand.

Then—she was gone: and for Mark it was as if the sun had fallen out of the sky. Alone—with the haunting sense of her presence, the empty chair, and that letter in his pocket, a chill conviction crept through him that life—real life—was over and done with—that he had reached the dead end of everything.

His mother, when she reappeared, found him lying listless and unoccupied, staring into space. As she came to the fire and drew off her gloves, he glanced up at her without a word of greeting: a glance that would normally have hurt her. But, in those days, thought and feeling were altogether concentrated on him.

"Darling," she said, in a voice that tried not to sound over-anxious, "you look horribly done up. It was lovely, wasn't it? But I'm afraid it's all been a little too much for you."

His answer, spoken in a vehement undertone, jarred all through her.

"You're right. The whole cursed situation is just a little too much for me." Then, seeing the startled pain in her eyes, he handed her Bel's envelope, adding more gently: "I'm not going off my head. That came this morning."

She read it slowly, with very mixed feelings, and Mark's eyes never left her face. The breeze of her thoughts rippled over it like wind over a pool. But she did not "rage" as he had anticipated. She was at once too thankful and too profoundly angered by the girl's invincible coolness and selfishness to find relief in mere explosives.

"Well?" he asked, seeing that she had reached the end.

"*Well!*" she echoed, with eloquent brevity. Then, after a pause: "No wonder that took the virtue out of Sheila's visit. It's Bel through and through. I can make no severer comment. And, after all, one detects a touch of poetic justice. She did it . . . before to hurt you deliberately for her own ends. Now she's compelled to do it, being what she is. Of course——"

"Mother, be *quiet!*" Mark's eyebrows twitched and he raised a commanding hand. "She's in the right of it. But yesterday . . . she never gave me a chance. . . . Not likely I should dream of holding her to . . . Oh Lord!" He clenched his hand and closed his eyes, as if to shut out the intolerable truth. But the enemy was within.

And his mother stood there watching him. Every nerve in her quivered with his pain as well as her own; and two great tears rolled unheeded down her cheeks.

Suddenly Mark opened his eyes; and at sight of her mute controlled misery, his heart smote him.

"*Mother* . . . I'm a graceless beast," he said slowly. "Thank God—there's *you*——"

"Yes—there's me—always!" With a sharp sob she fell on her knees beside him and pressed her lips upon his hand.

CHAPTER IX

"Suffer not woman in her tenderness to sit near him in the darkness. Banish the frailties of hope, wither the relenting of love, scorch the fountain of tears. . . . "

DE QUINCEY.

NEXT morning they could speak of it all more calmly. Mark had slept little and had done some unpleasantly lucid thinking in the small hours.

"Now—it must be business to-day," he said, when his mother appeared after breakfast, to read or to write for him according to his mood. "And first, we must answer *this*."

He brought his hand down sharply on Bel's letter.

"Need you?" she asked.

"Yes—I need. I've . . . one or two things to say. My left-hand scrawl's not legible yet; so—you must write them for me. She won't like *that*."

It was the first time Helen Forsyth had heard a vindictive note in her son's voice.

"No," she said quietly; and, opening his despatch-case, she laid out her materials, while he sat worrying his moustache.

When she was ready, he dictated in a low, impersonal tone the "one or two things" that he had thought out in the small hours.

"Bel, I have your letter. Of course you are free. I

had no other intention. I meant to tell you on Thursday, but . . . I was a weak fool——"

"Mark!" his mother remonstrated; and he frowned sharply.

"I was a weak fool," he repeated with emphasis. "Written it?"

"Yes."

"As it's hard on you losing everything, I am instructing my solicitors to pay you the £5000 I told you about. Money is always useful."

At that, his mother laid down her pen.

"My dear boy, it's out of the question. Walker will think you've gone mad."

"Walker may think what he pleases. He will get his instructions before he knows the engagement is off."

The set of Mark's face warned her that she was knocking her head against a wall; but she could not give in without further protest.

"Darling, do be reasonable," she pleaded. "It's not fair——"

"Not fair—on whom?" he blazed round at her. "I'm not despoiling Wynchcombe Friars. And it isn't as if . . . there was any chance— Marriage is out of the question. And . . . it's a bit hard on Bel. After all, she's lost her husband through the war. I'm simply treating her as if she was my widow. And it *may* save some other luckless chap from . . . the 'business arrangement' she proposes to ratify at the altar. Anyway, Mother, the money's mine, and I don't feel fit to argue the point. If you won't write what I want, I must do it through Keith—that's all."

She bit her lip to keep back the futile retort. He was plainly not himself this morning. Dr. Norton

had warned her of possible nerve complications. Opposition was useless; probably harmful. And what did a little money matter after all?

"Of course I'll write what you want, Mark," she said quietly. "But . . . wouldn't three thousand be enough?"

"Oh, all right, three thousand," he agreed listlessly, to her complete surprise. All the fire seemed to have gone out of him. "Let's get it over. Have you written everything? Thanks. Give it here."

He read it through, while his mother watched him with troubled eyes, then slowly, laboriously he scrawled with his left hand: "Good-bye. Mark Stuart Forsyth."

"There—that's done," he said, pushing the paper across the table. "Write instructions to Walker in my name, will you? I feel fagged out. This cursed lying up saps all one's energy."

Though her heart yearned over him, she answered nothing. He needed no cheap word of sympathy from her. They were one in suffering; and he knew it. All she could do for him was to be untiring in his service.

While she went on with her writing, he lay silent and inert, not even troubling to fill his pipe—an achievement that had delighted him a few days ago.

Mechanically Helen's pen travelled over the paper; but she scarcely knew what she wrote, so harassed was her brain with perplexity and foreboding. She had hoped much from Sheila's visit, but Bel had stepped in and spoilt the effect. Just when the first realisation of his fate was blackening everything, she must needs

rub salt into his wound by dwelling on the pain and strain which *she* could not endure. And Mark responded by heaping coals of fire on her head. It was maddening of him; but at the moment every minor consideration was dwarfed by the discouraging state of his nerves. His alterations between listlessness and irritability alarmed her. Mercifully, Dr. Norton was coming to-morrow; and she hoped Keith would arrive soon.

At the first, far-off sound of his footstep she laid down her pen. "I'll be back in a minute, darling," she said, and hurried away.

In the midst of all her anxiety and sorrow, it was a very real blessing to have Keith back again; and, as regards Mark, her reliance on him was absolute. To her, their relation seemed a singularly perfect thing. She had almost forgotten—in her concentration on Mark—that he was supposed to be in love with her.

"What's wrong now?" he asked: she was so obviously thankful to see him.

"Oh, everything. Come in here a minute."

She led him into the empty ante-room where visitors waited; and there told him, in a few trenchant phrases, the tale of Bel's defection, of Sheila's visit, and of Mark's change for the worse.

"I suspect he didn't sleep much last night, and I'm afraid I . . . rather . . . get on his nerves," she concluded, with a pitiful quiver of her lip. "Something fresh is hurting him terribly—something bigger, I think, than the loss of Bel. Keith . . . I'm afraid . . . for his precious brain."

"Don't get thinking *that*, Helen." Keith's eyes

were gentler than his tone. "How about another drive? The first was a success. We'll ask Nurse."

"Yes, do." Her face cleared. "But I think—unless he asks for me—I won't come. He can feel my anxiety—just as I feel his pain. And it worries him."

"Well—perhaps you're right. You mothers are the standing miracles of creation."

She shook her head; but his quietly spoken tribute cheered and comforted her, as he had meant that it should.

"Nurse" approved the suggestion of a drive, and Mark assented without enthusiasm. He also accepted without comment the fact that his mother was not coming; and she, from the window, watched them go in a mood of bewildered misery that came very near despair. Could she have broken down the wall of Mark's reserve and probed the depths of his hidden pain, even her fine courage might altogether have given way. But mercifully man "goes upon his long business like a blind child. . . ."

To-day's drive was quite conspicuously not a success. The first one had come at a happy moment. But Mark was slipping steadily down into the dark places of the soul where happy moments are not, where he would have to fight with beasts—quite as real and terrible as the beasts at Ephesus—before he could win again to daylight and sanity and acceptance.

To-day, though the sun shone fitfully and the sky showed frail patches of blue, his soul was unresponsive, utterly, to the still small voice of hope. To-day the mere sight of whole men and women, walking, riding,

free to come and go, to feel the good earth under their feet, stirred him suddenly to such a fury of rebellion that he felt as if his brain would burst.

Bombs! That was what he wanted. Bombs to hurl right and left into that complacent crowd, that talked "war" and "atrocities" and "the Christmas truce," and knew nothing about it all—nothing whatever. Why were there no bombs? It was scandalous mismanagement——

By some queer freak, the taxi had become a trench and the complacent Londoners were Germans—swarms of them. One couldn't imagine Germans otherwise than in swarms. And there was only one way to prevent these swarms from overrunning the earth:—shells and guns, unlimited shells and guns. When the deuce would Home Authorities even *begin* to wake up. . . ?

At this point the Germans vanished; the trench was a taxi again, and Mark glanced furtively at Keith as if to see whether he had noticed the transformation. But Keith had merely seen the outer Mark sunk in an unnatural apathy that seemed to confirm his own worst forebodings; and now, in response to that questioning glance, he smiled his tranquil, rather tired smile.

"A nice change getting out into the open, eh, old man?" he said. "In a few months' time you may be handling your own car."

"Think so?" A flicker of interest sounded in Mark's tone.

"Quite possible, I should say. When that day comes we'll go round recruiting again—you and I."

Then, having caught Mark's attention, he dilated

a little upon that vexed question, and ventured a pious hope that some day, something—perhaps Zeppelin bombs in Downing Street—would convince a Government, presumably anxious for victory, that, in war, time spelt not merely money but infinitely precious human lives.

Mark gave the matter his polite consideration, though it seemed to him curiously remote. Keith was doing his best. They all were; but none of them had a glimmering idea of the Sheila complication, or of what the whole thing meant—for him. Just as well, perhaps.

He felt half ashamed, now, of the sudden rage that had possessed him; and that brief vivid delusion had startled him not a little. He must "hang on to things" firmly or it might recur.

He hung on, accordingly, till the drive ended and they carried him up to his room, haunted now by Sheila's presence. His mother was out; and Keith, as luck would have it, began to talk of Sheila and to sing her praises, till Mark could endure it no more. His brows twitched and he hung on to things with desperate tenacity. But it was useless. Keith, in the kindness of his heart, was jabbing nails into him: driving them home——

For a time Mark bore it in semi-silence: then, to Keith's consternation, he suddenly and very completely let himself go. . . .

For close on half an hour he cursed everything and everyone, more especially the devoted Macgregor, whose superfluous zeal had saved him from extinction. He raged against his dependence on others, against the broken life ahead of him, with a terrible fluency

and command of language that Keith had not heard from him since full power of speech returned.

To interrupt or reason with him were worse than useless: moreover, Macnair knew that, for a man of Mark's passionate nature, some such explosion was inevitable, and he devoutly hoped it might bring relief. Much of it, both in manner and matter, was so foreign to the true Mark, that Keith found it all unendurably painful. Yet he endured; and at intervals said what he could, which was little enough; first, because he was a tongue-tied Scot; second, because Mark was in no condition just then for comfort of any kind.

Slowly the storm died down to disconnected mutterings of apology and self-disgust; and the sound of his mother's footstep without silenced him altogether.

"Oh Lord! Here's Mums," he murmured, and Keith did not fail to notice the worried look in his eyes. "Don't go, old man. And for God's sake—don't give me away."

"*Is* it likely?" Keith asked, with a reproachful look. "She has more than enough to bear."

Words and tone had their intended effect. When his mother appeared, Mark achieved a smile.

She came to him and kissed his forehead.

"Had a nice drive?"

"Oh, a damned delectable drive!" he answered with a short laugh. "Beastly unfair on Keith, dosing him with an hour of my society."

"You shut up," Keith commanded sternly; and Helen, seeing that something had gone wrong, made haste to change the subject.

Keith took her out to lunch and had a good deal to say about the political situation. Then, the day being

Saturday, he insisted on a Symphony Concert. He further insisted on ringing up Sir John Forsyth—who happened to be in town—and asking him to look in on Mark for tea. Helen never liked him better than in these occasional autocratic moods. Too often nowadays the one thing she prayed to be delivered from was a decision, no matter how trifling; and at such times the masculine note of command was restful beyond belief.

So she went with him to the Queen's Hall; and Beethoven's music flowed like a river of healing over the bruised places of her heart; and when they returned to Park Lane, Sir John began insisting also.

This, though she never guessed it, was equally Keith's doing.

Laura, he said, had given him strict injunctions to bring Helen back for dinner. "Quite quiet," the Admiral assured her, seeing hesitation on her face. "Only ourselves and the Desmonds. He's up on some recruiting business. Age cannot wither him. Wonderful fellow!"

"But—Mark," Helen murmured, glancing at her son, who seemed lost in his own reflections.

"I'll spend the evening with him," Keith struck in. "Nothing I should enjoy better."

Mark, who was listening fitfully, greeted that statement with a grimace and a faint, very faint, twinkle in his eye. The eclipse of his humour was, to those who loved him, a bitter thing; and, in Keith's opinion, a bad sign.

It was certainly not in evidence that evening. The afternoon's explosion seemed to have flung him to the other extreme. He smoked pipe after pipe without

volunteering a word; and Keith, watching him unobserved, grew more anxious than ever. Towards the end, after a long silence, he suddenly leaned forward and gave Keith a straight look.

"I've got it!" he said, with decision.

"Got what, old chap?" Keith asked, feeling seriously alarmed.

"A priceless sentence of Robert Louis'—rather apt for the occasion," Mark answered; and Keith broke into a low laugh of relief. "It's been wandering in my head, bits of it. Couldn't piece them together. Now it's come straight. 'When we have fallen through storey after storey of our vanity and aspiration, and sit rueful among the ruins, it is then that we begin to measure the stature of our friends.' Struck me I'd been . . . measuring yours to-day. Understand?"

"I do understand." Keith was too deeply moved to say more.

"Not quite so crazy, am I, as I sounded this afternoon," Mark went on, with a pathetic pride in his own achievement.

"Not a bit of it! If you can quote R. L. S. verbatim, you'll do all right, in time."

"Yes—in time." Mark let out his breath and leaned back against his cushions. "Meanwhile I—'sit rueful among the ruins.' And you must make allowances, you . . . people."

At that, Keith rose abruptly; it was time to be gone.

"My dear fellow," he said, and laid a hand on Mark's shoulder, "we're ready to make all the allowances on earth. Only—" a pause—"as far as you can . . . be merciful to your mother."

Mark sighed. "Mums? Yes—that's the difficulty. Women *are* the deuce."

"A few of them," Keith remarked with quiet emphasis, "are about all the visible guarantee we have that—there's a God in heaven!"

Then he took his leave, feeling a shade less anxious, but determined to be on the spot next morning and to see Dr. Norton when he came

"Sleep sound, old chap," was his parting injunction; but the brief snatches of sleep that came to Mark in the early hours of the night were robbed of all healing influence by dreams—hideous dreams, such as he had not suffered from since his earlier days in the Red Cross barn. Vividly he saw again that mound of earth, in the moonlight, and the leg that would not be still; and again, in imagination, he crept out into the open, caring nothing for risks if only he could quiet that leg or release its owner.

Up to this point, the dream was always the same. It varied only in its culmination. And to-night there sprang from behind the mound a colossal German with nails like talons and eyes like live coals. But when Mark would have sprung at him he found himself paralysed; while the Thing under the mound whimpered for help, and the Creature—a very Apollyon—loomed nearer every moment. . . .

Miraculously, he shook off that nightmare rigidity. He was locked in a suffocating death-grapple. The Creature's breath scorched his face; and, with a start, he awoke, shivering, beads of cold sweat upon his forehead.

"My God!" he breathed, between horror and relief,

and promptly switched on the light. It was just after one o'clock; but sleep and the desire of sleep were gone from him.

To quiet his mind and cleanse it of fear he tried reading a few pages of *Michel Ange*. It was useless. His eyes followed the words but, although he understood them, they made no connected impression on his brain.

With a sigh he gave it up, switched off the light and lay there, open-eyed, hour after hour, watching two panels of moonlight shift slowly across the carpet, climb the wall, lessen and vanish as the moon swung westward. Outside, the companionable hum of traffic grew fainter; ceased altogether; and left him at the mercy of his increasingly bitter thoughts.

Too clearly he foresaw the peculiar trials of his hampered, restricted life; devoid of freedom, devoid of movement, save such as he could accomplish in a wheeled chair, or a motor—perhaps. To a man of independent spirit and immense physical vigour, the prospect was intolerable; and the glimmer of hope on the horizon was too dim to pierce the fog that shrouded his spirit. Better a shattered limb, that could have been replaced, than this hulk of useless bone and sinew. Even now he could not grasp the fact that in all probability, he would never stand squarely on his feet again——

And that was only a part of the tragedy: the rest was entirely of his own making, which did not mend matters—rather the reverse.

In the silence, one reiterate sentence kept hammering at his brain: "All along, I have been a fool—worse than a fool. All along, Mums has been right."

Forcing himself to travel backward through the years, he saw, now, how obviously it had been Sheila from the very beginning; so obviously, that he had taken things almost too much for granted. She and Mums were his life. He had asked nothing better; and having them constantly with him, he had scarcely given a thought to marriage. On the whole, he had preferred his freedom. Marriage could wait.

It was her sudden departure from his horizon and her charming letters—she was fairly communicative on paper—that had set him thinking seriously of her, dreaming of her, longing to see her again. That year of her absence had seemed a rather blank year.

Then—she had come back. . . .

He remembered very well that moment of meeting; the stir in his veins; the new touch of shyness between them, and the light in his mother's eyes. He understood it all now. She had been watching her dearest dream come true.

Soon after that he had found himself wondering—did Sheila, by any chance, care? Or was it chiefly Mums? And was he no more to her than Ralph?

At that point—with a suddenness, a swiftness of which he now felt half ashamed—Bel happened to him. There is no other word for it. She came, smiled, conquered; and for a time he was translated; no longer master of his destiny and very hardly master of himself.

Living again through those days, he began to suspect that from the first her effect on him had been conscious, deliberate. There was no true simplicity in her. Yet with what engaging charm she could affect simplicity, the better to secure her hold on him.

Since his return, since he had been able to see her as she was, he had perceived that she represented, in subtle gracious guise, an appeal which, in its more obvious forms, he had successfully withstood. For this, for the glamour, the unsatisfying charm of the mere courtesan—so he labelled her in his bitterness—he had flung aside a real woman; one of the few, as Keith had said, who are a visible guarantee of God. He had dropped the substance to catch at a shadow: and now, too late, the horrors and splendours of war, the shining faith and saintliness of one small French nun, had renewed a right spirit within him and opened his eyes to the truth.

It was the cruelest knowledge of his life. Even the crippling of his manhood seemed a small thing beside that other loss for which he alone was to blame.

Strange how vivid was the feel of her in absence! How near she had drawn to him in France! And Bel, not seen, eluded him utterly. Proof—he knew it now—that she was but the fair semblance of reality; while Sheila, like the King's daughter, was "all glorious within." Six months ago, she might have been his for the asking. And she would have stood by him, stood by him to the end——

Towards morning, he slept heavily for an hour; and woke with a dead weight on heart and brain: a weight, beyond his power to shift, that seemed steadily pressing him down, down into the depths——

In this state Dr. Norton found him; and, after some fifteen minutes of very lop-sided talk, he said decisively: "Sir Mark, I've come to the conclusion we

can't keep you here your full time. The sooner we get you out of Town the better."

"Home?" Mark asked, a glimmer of hope in his voice.

"I'm afraid—not yet. But a move in that direction. 'Mavins,' in Surrey; a beautiful old place. Perhaps you know it?"

Mark nodded.

"Sir Howard Meredith has given it over to convalescents like yourself, who need mental as well as physical healing. I'll ring them up. Move you to-day, if possible. You'll go quite comfortably by motor ambulance."

"Thanks."

The veil of indifference had fallen again. "Anything's preferable—to this."

"Cheer up, then, and give yourself a chance," Norton commanded briskly; but he walked down the passage with an anxious line between his brows.

He found Macnair and Lady Forsyth in the sitting-room, and wasted no words in vain preliminaries.

"My patient's all to pieces," he announced bluntly. "Nerves in a rotten state. What have you been doing to him these two days?"

Helen briefly explained the situation and Bel's latest move.

As the doctor listened, anxiety gave place to anger.

"Good Lord! As if he hadn't enough against him! I've distrusted that young lady and her silky manners from the start. Seen too many of her kind, in hospitals, smoking cigarettes with wounded officers, under the impression that they are doing their 'bit' for their

country. He's well rid of her; but this is a critical moment for any fresh upset."

He proceeded to unfold his plan; and to them he explained more fully that "Mavins" was more a home for nerve-shattered officers. There Sir Mark would be in the best possible hands; noted specialists, professors of psychology; and there was no reason to suppose that he might not pull round completely, in time.

"We'll move him to-day if we can," Norton concluded, addressing Lady Forsyth. "His best chance just now is to get right away from everything and everyone associated with this business; especially—from you!"

She managed to smile. "Oh, I know, I'm the fatal one——"

"Because he cares for you most," Norton reminded her in a gentler tone. Then he went off to make the necessary arrangements.

After a good deal of telephoning, matters were settled. Mark would leave in the early afternoon. Dr. Norton, meanwhile, had discovered that Macnair was a personal friend of Professor Langton, the great psychologist. On the strength of this he proposed that Keith should go down with Mark and stay a few days till he felt settled in his new surroundings.

Mark, himself, took no visible interest in it all. He seemed to have slipped hopelessly out of reach.

After lunch his mother came in for a few minutes to say good-bye; and there on his table lay an open note in Bel's handwriting. For a moment it startled her: then she remembered his quixotic gift.

"May I?" she asked, and he nodded.

Bel's acknowledgment was brief and, as usual, effective.

"Coals of fire on my head. How exactly like you! And—what can one say, except that my utter unworthiness is the measure of my gratitude.—BEL."

"Posing to the last!" was Lady Forsyth's enraged reflection. "That's the best place for it," she said aloud; and tearing it across, she flung it in the fire.

Mark, leaning back against his cushions watched it burn.

Helen was watching his face. It showed no glimmer of feeling. Then, anxiety and curiosity so pricked her that she ventured a question.

"Darling," she said, a hand on his shoulder, "I'm puzzled. Is this fresh trouble—altogether Bel?"

"N—no. Not the way you mean. Still—she's responsible——"

His brows twitched. He seemed to force the words out, frowning at the fire.

Then, unexpectedly, he looked up at her, a strange, wild light in his eyes. "Mums, it's—oh God! . . . It's *everything!*"

To that heart-piercing cry there could be only one answer. Stooping over him, she kissed him, holding him close; and he, with sudden fervour, returned her kiss, clutching her hand as if he could not bear to let it go.

So they parted, with never a word; and her question remained unanswered;—the puzzle still unsolved.

Keith went with him, as arranged. Sheila was presumably chained to Westover; and Helen, with heart and hope near breaking-point, was left utterly alone.

BOOK IV

VIA LUCIS

CHAPTER I

"So shall he read elder truths, grand truths, fearful truths. And so shall our mission be accomplished, that from God we had —to plague his heart till we had unfolded the capacities of his spirit."

OUR LADY OF SORROWS.

MAVINS, like Wynchcombe Friars, was set upon a ridge; but the house was comparatively modern and here was no falling and rising sea of pine-tops splashed in dark foam against the sky. Lawns and shrubberies ended in a low brick wall matted with arabis and aubretia. And beyond the wall lay Surrey, and again more Surrey, merging into Sussex: gentle undulations, interlacing ridges and, in the clear weather, the sweeping line of the Downs, mistily blue along the horizon. When the wind was in the south, Sir Howard Meredith would call upon his visitors to note the whiff of sea-salt in the air: and those who were sufficiently imaginative would scent that phantom whiff with enthusiasm.

But there was, now, no host at Mavins, though there were many guests. For Sir Howard had entirely devoted his beautiful place to those that—excepting prisoners—were perhaps the saddest aftermath of war as conceived and waged by modern Germany: men broken in nerve and spirit; strong men, shaken by

dreams and delusions, who dreaded the night and cried out in their sleep; men, who sat alone and wept, quietly, hopelessly, because their manhood was gone from them, and with it, their power of self-control. One there was, a mere boy of two and twenty, crazed permanently, the doctors feared, because he had seen a lad of his own platoon crucified with indignity by German soldiers; and—he could not forget. That was the secret torment of so many who came out of the trenches seemingly unscathed:—they could not forget. Mark knew. It had been the chief of his own troubles in that backwater in France.

Yet now, for a time, under the deadening influence of nervous depression, he lived and moved among these tragic fellow-sufferers almost as though they were not. The first few weeks of isolation from all he loved, drifted by like a timeless, colourless dream. He seldom opened a paper or troubled to read his letters. He wrote none, and hardly a trace remained of his keen interest in the war. He learnt with blank indifference, that the Russian "steam-roller" was rolling to some purpose through Galicia, that the first Zeppelins had arrived in England and dropped bombs on the east coast. Even the more personal news of Ralph's gallant death in action scarcely seemed to reach him.

It was the crazed boy and his story that gave him the first sharp twinge of pain—herald of returning life.

He heard it from Honor Lenox, Maurice's elder sister. She was at Mavins that winter, doing V. A. D. work, to which she had devoted herself unremittingly since the outbreak of war. As hospital orderly, she had been through the siege of Antwerp and the

retreat upon Ostend. She had ministered to stunned and starving refugees, had earned conspicuous distinction in advance ambulance work, and had lately been decorated by the King. A brief collapse, following on those strenuous months in Flanders, obliged her for the moment, to be content with lighter work at home: and Mark, on arrival, had been practically given into her charge.

She was a tall, plain girl, strikingly plain: with her father's rough-cut features and clear northern eyes. The two were already acquainted: and Mark, in his present mood, found refreshment in her bluntness and dry humour and strong, unbeautiful face. The normal Mark did not suffer plain women gladly. But at the moment it was Honor's chief asset that she was neither fair, fascinating nor conspicuously a woman. The revulsion—as Keith had prophesied—was complete.

There was virtue also in her sane, soldierly attitude towards the war. She neither denounced it as "devilish and senseless," nor harped morbidly on horrors. She had seen both sides of the shield. She knew—as he knew—that from the pains of hell spring the splendours of sacrifice and devotion: that the true peace which passes understanding is not the prerogative of the shirker and the pacifist; that in the trenches and even in the shambles of a modern battlefield, "Death rages but he does not reign." There you have, perhaps, the main distinction between those who have been in the firing line and those who have not: between the soldiers who have resisted unto blood, and the ineffectives—willing and unwilling—obsessed by casualty lists, atrocities and shattered men. That spirit

Mark chiefly associated with Bel: and he was the more thankful to find no trace of it in the daughter of Sir Eldred Lenox.

Not that she soothed him with fairy tales. On the contrary, she recounted, purposely and in plain terms, many of her worst experiences; probing him with stiletto pricks of pain sharper than his own; if so be that she might stab his spirit broad awake.

It was his unnatural indifference to Ralph's death that had prompted her to tell him in full the pitiful tale of that crazed subaltern: a brilliant Oxford scholar, whose brain had been unhinged not by the normal rigours of war but by the abnormal cruelty of scientifically dehumanised German soldiers. The telling of it pained her horribly; and the hearing of it hurt Mark as nothing had hurt him yet since that night when the sword of realisation pierced his soul.

Manlike, pain vented itself in anger. Why the dickens did she talk about such beastliness? he demanded irritably: and she knew she had touched a vulnerable spot.

"I don't—as a rule," she said without apology. "But, now and then, something goads me to remind myself and others that this *isn't* an ordinary war. It's a crusade against organised powers of evil. It makes vengeance almost a sacred duty. And we've got to realise things like that—however much we shrink from them—in order to crush out, absolutely, the spirit that makes them possible."

There was no fervour, no touch of the didactic in her quiet, rather flat voice. It spoke, with deep conviction, the very thoughts that had burned in his own

brain after hearing the story of "la petite Pauline"; and for the first time the real Mark looked with real interest at Maurice's sister.

"That's so," he agreed gruffly. "Not much use though for the poor crocked-up devils who can't help any more."

She looked back at him in her direct, masculine fashion. A smile hovered in her eyes. "There are crocks *and* crocks!" she said. "And there are other ways besides fighting. Think them over. You'll find it as good as a tonic."

He did think them over: and it was as good as a tonic. He reverted more than once to the subject of young Carmichael. Was there no hope? A shadow of hope, Honor told him. His mother—who came at intervals—was heart-broken.

That last bit of information took effect, as intended. Mark began to talk of his own mother. He also began to think about Ralph and Sheila. He wondered. . . . He wanted to know. . . .

By slow degrees, light was breaking through the fog that shrouded his spirit. Then came Sheila's letter about Ralph, that let in quite a painful flood of sensation.

"I wonder, have they told you," she wrote, "that my Ralph has had the honour of dying for his country? It was an honour he coveted with all his heart; and they say he came by it splendidly. I promised him long ago that, if this happened, I would not grieve nor wear mourning. But, oh Mark (if you are really waking up again), *you* will know, better than any one but Mums, how blank everything feels some days

when pride seems no prop at all and there is simply the emptiness—the longing——.

"He was the one bit of home that seemed really to belong. I know to the outside world he seemed just a very ordinary subaltern overburdened with brains. But I'm sure England need think no shame of her very ordinary subalterns judging from their record in war.

> 'To sacrifice she prompts her best,
> She reaps them as the sower reaps.'

That's Meredith, isn't it? It has the sound of him. Mother has really been wonderful in refusing to let our private sorrow interfere with her work. She says we are all dedicated—with an extra big D. You know her way. But it is not all talk. She's proved that these last few weeks. Dear Mark, forgive if my letter makes you sad. It's only to you two I *can* say a little of what I feel—on the bad days. In between, I can go quietly on and be grateful for my gift, such as it is, and pray that you may soon be home again to cheer the brave Mums in her great loneliness! I go to her whenever I can. Mr. Macnair is ambulance driver in France again. I do wish he would come back. And oh—a fresh trouble. My dear Mona is very ill with typhoid at Boulogne. I long to go to her. But I'm badly wanted here. Isn't your right arm well enough yet to manage a letter? Mums tells me she hasn't heard. Half a dozen lines, the merest scrawl even, would cheer her ever so. Do try. Yours always, Sheila."

That letter gave him a sudden blessed sense of enlargement; as if a window had been opened in his

brain. It also pricked his awakening conscience: and he did try, with very fair success.

Surely and steadily his right hand regained its cunning: and even the tentative return of power feelingly persuaded him that this skilled servant of his brain, was worth all the rest of his body put together. After all, he had willed to risk everything; to give everything. He had recognised that the price of patriotism might be a very long price: but he had never dreamed of paying it in this form.

He tried to express some of these thoughts in a long outpouring to that brave lonely mother he had treated so ill. He also attempted a letter to Sheila: but the only thing he really wanted to tell her was the one thing that must never be told.

Having written the words: "My dear Sheila," he sat there, pen in hand, cursing the fate that forbade him to add, "I love you—I love you—I love you." Simply that. The sheer relief of it!

Suppose he did—what would her answer be?

Oh—coward and fool! Apart from every other disability how could he account for Bel?

In the end he wrote to her at some length of Ralph and Mona and Mums. It frightened him afterwards to realise how near he had come to the cliff's edge.

Sheila's mention of Mona set him thinking of Maurice. Queer that Miss Lenox had never mentioned him. Next time they were alone together he spoke of Mona's illness and asked after her brother.

Honor's face clouded a little.

"My poor Maurice," she said, "was not made for great days or terrible events. He has had a bitter bad time. It has broken him to pieces. And Father,

who is always rather down on him, takes it very hard. There are the Desmond boys winning decorations—and his own eldest son——"

"How about his eldest daughter?" Mark asked smiling.

"Oh—she's a faint consolation! But not quite the same thing. Dick's doing good work in the Flying Corps, which is much more to the point."

"But Maurice—where is he, poor chap? There's good stuff in him if he isn't a fighter. I'd like to hear more."

So she told him more; glad of his increasing concern for others; though it went hard with her to speak freely of anything so near her heart. Maurice, it seemed, had returned to the Front after a fortnight in the hospital where Mona worked and a week at home.

"In love with her—is he?" Mark asked.

"Yes. Very much so. That made a fresh jar with Father. He's devoted to Colonel and Mrs. Laurence. But he could not bear the idea of Dr. Videlle's daughter marrying his son; though he wouldn't have Mrs. Laurence know that for the world. It was a most awkward tangle. Father objected and Maurice insisted; and it quite spoilt the poor boy's crumb of leave. Then he had an awful spell in the trenches. His letters to me—" she paused to steady her lips. "I think—he was thankful when he got hit. But it's his right hand—badly damaged——"

"Oh Lord! D'you mean—he may lose it?"

"I'm not sure. They still hope to save it—partially. He's back at Boulogne. The same hospital. His poor nerves worse than ever. Mother's out there too."

"And Mona?"

Honor was silent a moment; then she said in a quiet, toneless voice: "Mona . . . is dead. I only heard yesterday!"

"Good God!" Mark's voice was hushed also. He wanted to say more. Miss Lenox was evidently upset. But before he found the adequate word, she was speaking again in the same level tone.

"It is sometimes difficult, in these days, to go on believing that God *is* good. Maurice knew—she cared. He spoke to her a few days before she fell ill. It gave him such a lift. And now—he's half crazed, Mother says. They talk of sending him here. I hope they will. Professor Langton is working marvels."

They did send him to Mavins, with the remains of his right hand in a sling. The bulk of it had been saved. Only the little finger and half the forefinger were gone: so that eventually, with practice, he would draw and paint again. But at present no word of comfort could reach his half-distracted brain. All day long he talked wildly and rapidly of Mona; and at night he could not sleep for dreams. A troublesome case; not an obstinate one, the friendly Professor of Psychology told Honor; but it was not advisable at present to let him see much of his sister or his friend.

Meanwhile the girl devoted herself to Sir Mark, and found no small comfort in his gradual progress toward a saner, happier mood of mind.

Keith—definitely back from France—came to see him oftener now, and they talked of Sheila. To Mark the mere sound of her name was like the music of running water in a barren land. It struck him that Keith seemed to be a good deal at Westover Court;

and he fell to wondering about "Mums." Because he, Mark, had not been knocked out, did the queer fellow mean to keep silence for ever?

It also struck him as strange that his mother had never been to see him. At last he asked for her; and she came, straightway, on the wings of the first available express. Resolutely she had held to her hard resolve not to go near him till he needed her; and now she had her reward. He said little, but his hand clutched hers; and his eyes, that had a gleam of the old light in them, followed her wherever she moved.

"Come again soon," he said at parting; and she came again soon. . . .

So February slipped by; and light increased without and within. Far away, in the Mediterranean, by way of prelude to the splendid and terrible Gallipoli adventure, British warships were lobbing shells into the forts along the Narrows: and cheerful prophets predicted the fall of Constantinople within a month. And still, across the Channel, the interminable underground war dragged on. And still a sanguine Government did its casual best to defeat the frankly malignant German with the maximum of polite consideration; to which end, Ministers temporised, fatally, over conscription and enemy aliens and high explosives and other awkward trifles that involved the removal of kid gloves. And the voice of criticism and division—hushed in the inaugural days of 1914—was once more heard in the land.

And still, week after week, War—that is no respecter of Governments—exacted its inexorable toll of the young and the incomparably brave; and the fearful

also: and from Germany came the cry of the prisoners —starved, tortured, yet unbroken—"How long, O Lord, how long!"

Each dawn brought some new shock of grief to hundreds of hearts; brought also its golden grain of healing to those already stricken——

At Mavins, as the days grew longer and milder, healing came gradually both to Maurice and Mark.

Maurice's mercurial nature had responded more rapidly to both atmosphere and treatment than the doctors had dared to hope. He talked less and slept more. The strange, unseeing stare went out of his eyes; and there came a day when Langton—who looked favourably on Miss Lenox—declared that it rested with her to complete his cure.

Events justified him; and Mark found a new interest not untinged with envy, in watching the two together. The very qualities that made for discord between Maurice and his father, seemed to link the brother and sister in a bond closer than common. It set Mark thinking of Ailsa and wondering—would he eventually arrive at accepting Sheila in that relation, the only one now possible between them. Increasingly he longed to see her. But she did not come and he would not ask.

In this fashion February drew to an end and Dr. Norton came down to inspect his former patient. In his old guarded manner, he expressed himself satisfied with Mark's general condition; and confirmed the opinion of his colleague at Mavins that improvement, slight yet unmistakable, had already begun. But how far it might ultimately go, not a doctor among them would venture to prophesy yet. Mark's nerves,

at all events, were obviously on the mend. For a time, they told him, he must "go softly" and keep clear of worry or strain. The more normal his life and surroundings, the better his chance of complete mental readjustment; and there was talk of going home before long.

That, unquestionably, was a move in the right direction: and yet—he felt half afraid. Coward selfishness whispered that, in this peaceful backwater, "things" were easier to bear. Manhood urged that he had been long enough on the shelf. It was high time to rouse himself and give his country such service as he could; to conquer a certain morbid dread of facing his own world—in a wheeled chair.

He did some hard and wholesome thinking on the subject while Maurice, in the transition stage, claimed the chief part of Honor's attention; and he discovered that here was the secret of his faint reluctance to go home, though well he knew that his mother was counting the days to his return.

He made that unheroic discovery on the last day of February, a day of fugitive, appealing beauty.

With the help of the despised wheeled chair—that gave him a small measure of freedom—he had established himself in his special corner of the grounds, at the far end of the long low wall looking southward across Surrey and Sussex to the sea. The February sun was warm as April. Close to him loomed a wide-spreading yew, centuries old. In the shadow of its blackness snowdrops gleamed; and on its uppermost branch sat a thrush, pouring out a torrent of song. Almost, in response to that brave music, Mark could feel the earth stirring in her sleep, even as his own benumbed spirit was stirring within him after the

darkest winter he had ever known. A light breeze blew from the south. Stately masses of cloud drifted across the heavens; the Downs—grey-blue, against a toneless horizon—seemed astonishingly near. . . .

Mark, brooding on them, recalled Meredith's phrase: "The Downs have swiftness." They set a man longing for a winged horse or for the Seven-League boots. At first he had hardly been able to bear the sight of them. He was learning to bear it now; even as he was learning to accept cheerfully, almost gratefully, quite a number of things that in the beginning had seemed unendurable. He was discovering, at first hand, the amazing adaptability of the human organism and the native resilience of his own spirit. There were black moods still, when the curses came. But these were increasingly offset by moods of high-hearted resolve to fling into his art all the energy and passion of his stultified life: moods far truer to his essential self; likelier therefore to endure.

And on this February day of drifting cloud and snowdrops and a jubilant thrush, the more normal Mark held the field.

For an hour and a half, to his great satisfaction, he had been left alone with his sketch-book and Meredith's *Nature Poems*—a favourite, illustrated edition—and his own resurgent thoughts. He knew now, definitely, that his time at Mavins was nearing an end. Dr. Carstairs had spoken yesterday of a week or ten days. That fact alone served to stiffen his manlier resolves.

And there was also another fact; quite unlooked-for, decidedly stimulating. Miss Lenox had discovered it in the *Times* that morning under the heading of "Army Honours." It notified the award of the Dis-

tinguished Service Order to Lieut. Sir Mark Stuart Forsyth: and, from the bone-dry record appended, Mark made the surprising discovery that on two occasions he had "exhibited conspicuous coolness and courage." Once, by his intrepid leading, he had carried a full trench against overwhelming odds: an unpleasant business, he remembered it very well. Another time during a retreat, when one flank of the battalion had been left in the air, he had, it seemed, held on tenaciously to a critical position and saved the regiment from annihilation. That must have been on the terrible last day of his recollection, when he had himself been annihilated for his pains.

Baldly set down, it struck him as very ordinary average behaviour in the circumstances. Quite likely poor old Maurice had been just as sporting now and then. Only no one happened to notice. It was all a matter of luck and partiality. A war that rained shells, rained decorations—naturally enough. It was very gratifying all the same, to have "stopped one": to possess a lasting memento of his own brief strenuous flash of effort.

And what did it amount to after all? For sixty days—whether in billets or trenches, or in the stress of actual fighting—he had lived at the full stretch of his being. He had quailed and suffered and exulted. He had seen with his eyes that, in nature and in human nature, beauty shines out undimmed, though all the devils of hell are leagued for its extinction. He had proved, in his own body and soul, that "in war man values the power which it affords to life of rising above life."

And now—this!

He glanced ruefully at the fur rug over his knees. Well, it was just a question whether those sixty days were not worth a lifetime of limitation. But—the loss of Sheila! There was the rub. . . .

With a deliberate wrench he shifted his thoughts back to their starting-point—those three proud letters after his name. He must write to the Colonel—and to "Mums." No doubt she had been secretly watching that list for weeks! And now there would be no holding her. A wonder she had not wired already. She would need repressing badly; or goodness knew what manner of fool she would make of him. He had been a beast to her all these weeks. He would atone for it when he got home. Then days seemed suddenly an intolerable time to wait. Impatience stirred in him: the best possible sign. He shook himself mentally—he had been mooning long enough;—and picked up his book again.

It was open at "The Thrush in February." Nothing like Meredith for tuning up the strings of a man's spirit: and this particular poem vibrates with the morning quality of his genius; his sane loyalty to Earth—Mother and Slayer in one.

He read on, now, from the point at which his personal affairs had intruded on the poet's thought.

"She, judged of shrinking nerves, appears,
A Mother whom no cry can melt;—
A slayer, yea, as when she pressed
Her savage to the slaughter-heaps.
To sacrifice she prompts her best;
She reaps them as the sower reaps.
But read her thought; to speed the race—
And stars rush forth of blackest night. . . ."

Again Mark paused, pondering those vigorous lines that might well have been written in this year of turmoil; of evil, self-exposed and rampant, that it may be the more squarely smitten. "To speed the race," at no matter what cost of individual life, individual pain: there you have the hard paradox of Nature, underlying every form of human activity; but focused, intensified, and poignantly realised when "God holds his assizes and hurls the nations on one another."

If a cog in the machinery is broken, what matter? There are scores of others available. It has given its mite of service toward the progress of the whole. But this particular cog was not altogether useless even now; for the which compensation God be praised.

To that mountain-top of philosophy Mark had clambered painfully enough: and to-day he caught an echo of it, clear and heartening, in the song of the poet and the song of the thrush——

At this point he became aware of approaching footsteps and voices. The thrush became aware of them also and took flight.

They drew nearer; and their owners came into view: Keith, Mums, Sheila,—all three of them, with Maurice and his sister. Now he knew why there had been no telegram. Just like her. He might have guessed.

Closing his book, he waved a welcome and his mother hurried forward.

"A surprise visit of congratulation, darling," she explained superfluously. "Well done!"

And she kissed him, unashamedly, before them all. There were moments when the Irish streak in her carried the day. There were also moments when even a son could not find it in his heart to be repressive.

Mark had enough ado to repress himself, when Sheila stood before him, her soft, cool hand in his; and Keith demanded gravely what the dickens he meant by giving his family such a shock: and Maurice, the born talker, looked on enviously and said nothing.

The happy event, the sunshine and the smell of spring in the air went to their heads like wine. It was as if some tension within had snapped. They talked nonsense once again with zeal and fluency; and Mark himself was as foolish as any of them. It was a vast relief, after those endless grey weeks when humour—the star of life—had dwindled to a farthing dip in the outer dark. Now it sparkled again, clear as ever: and Mark found it very good. . . .

Then, quite casually, in the middle of it all, Keith slipped in his own surprise contribution, that had been kept a profound secret during its incubation. It consisted of a small motor car, specially designed, light and easy to handle, in which—Mark with Keith's help —could drive about his beloved country, and regain a measure of the independent movement so dear to his heart. Keith himself was responsible for the thought, but the car was to be a combined gift from all three; the outward and visible sign of their joy in his return.

Mark—too overwhelmed for mere thanks—could only evince the liveliest interest in the "little beauty" and her manifold perfections. From car talk they drifted naturally to ambulance driving and an exchange of experiences between Honor and Keith. Even Maurice revived considerably under Lady Forsyth's sympathetic handling.

And through it all, Mark's inner self was chiefly aware of Sheila's voice, too seldom heard, and Sheila's eyes—

their twilight colour intensified by the grey-violet hat and gown that she wore in place of conventional mourning.

She sat on the low wall, a little apart from the group round his chair; her sweet, serious face shadowed by the double loss of brother and friend. The shadow lifted a little at sight of Mark's sketch-book. With a glance at him for permission, she opened it and went through it slowly, lingering a long while over each page.

He wanted her to himself so urgently that he wished the others at Jericho. Now and again he contrived an exchange of glances. Then he would hold her gaze a minute and reluctantly let her go. He had no business whatever to do this: and he knew it. But to-day he felt like a schoolboy out of bounds. He refused to look beyond the sunshine into the waiting dark.

Honor Lenox, he found, had planned a semi-secluded tea-party in a corner of the wide verandah, —the real Indian article; added by Sir Howard, who declared he would as soon live without shaving-soap as without a verandah. And Mark enjoyed it all consumedly, though not five minutes' talk did he get with Sheila alone. Suddenly and surprisingly, life had righted itself in defiance of tragic limitations. The good minute would pass; but the fact that it had come at all was of hopeful augury. And while it lasted, Mark could forget everything except that he had not lost his art; and that Sheila, however unattainable, was part of the vital fabric of his life.

"Will you still be at home when I come?" he asked her at parting; and she shook her head.

"'Fraid not. I go back on Friday, when 'Mums' goes to Lady John. But I'm to get leave for a visit soon, she says——"

"*I* say—" he corrected, under his breath; and again there passed between them that flash of understanding; a direct contact of spirit with spirit, never achieved in all his passionate courtship of Bel.

Oh, that he could banish her from his memory as though she had never been!

But Bel would not let herself be so easily forgotten. Though disenchantment was complete, she could still reassert herself, at inopportune moments, to tarnish a love so different in quality that there was need of some other name to call it by.

These thoughts visited him much later on that same evening, as he sat beside his fire reviewing the events of a day that marked a definite step towards the recovery of his spiritual balance; of a normal, if tempered, thankfulness for all that still remained to him of joy in life.

Lately Maurice had taken to looking in at this time for a talk; and he very soon appeared, with the inevitable cigarette and a rather doleful countenance.

For a while he sat smoking moodily, staring at the fire. Then, to Mark's surprise, he said in a constrained voice: "I suppose Honor told you—about Mona."

"Yes." Mark did his best to convey his own dumb depth of fellow-feeling in that one word. Maurice let out a great sigh.

"She—cared. She'd have married me, Father or no. Seeing Miss Melrose brought it all back again.

She . . . Mona . . . understood. *She* didn't think me a hopeless rotter because I've been a bit broken up by this cursed, inhuman war."

That tone towards the world's greatest crusade against machine-made tyranny and brutality jarred Mark always. And it savoured too much of Bel.

"Not a bit of use cursing the war, old chap," he said kindly. "Nearer the mark to curse the apostles of cheapness for cheapness' sake, who thwarted Joe Chamberlain, killed our economic independence, and delivered the Empire into the tentacles of the German octopus. But it's all done now; and we've just got to put our backs into it and pull things through. You've done your level best, Maurice, and no one thinks you a hopeless rotter. *I* don't. Your sister doesn't. Your mother——?"

Maurice frowned. "I'm hanged if I know what Mother thinks. She's awfully fond of me. But she's not the soft kind. And she hugely admires the genuine man of action; which accounts for my splendid but rather formidable father. *He* thinks me the out and outest rotter that ever stepped. If it wasn't for Honor, God knows where I'd be at this moment. And, as for going home—I believe a week of it would simply smash me up again."

"'M. I know what you mean. Why not come along to my place when you're quit of this? We've both got to make a fresh start somehow; and I've still to complete your conversion to Beauty and the Classics!"

"D'you *mean* that?" Maurice asked in genuine delight.

"Rather. It would give me a spurt. And your

sister could come for weekends. She's a rare good sort."

"Wish I had half her pluck. *She* ought to have been the soldier. I believe she'd give her eyes to take my place; and here am I—wondering if they've lopped and chopped my precious hand enough to keep me out of those unholy trenches for good."

Mark, scanning his friend's rueful profile, decided that mere sympathy was not the tonic for his complaint.

"You can't shoot without your trigger finger," he remarked in practical tones. "But that's no matter, now they've given you a commission."

Maurice grimaced.

"You don't want to go back—in any capacity, eh?" Mark asked casually.

"No. I'm damned if I do. Honestly, d'you suppose any man does who has a grain of sensibility in his composition?"

Mark was silent a moment, considering.

"I don't know. Hard to say. In either case, they wouldn't shout it from the housetops. Personally, I was keen to get back. Sheer perversity, perhaps: but it's true. God knows, killing and getting killed, the way it's done now, is a pretty gruesome business. But exterminating Prussianised Germans is a service to the civilised world; not to mention a man's first duty to his country. And to me there's beauty everywhere, Maurice, even on a battle-field. And, oh Lord, it's big. It's *real*—overpoweringly real." He paused and set his teeth hard. "I simply hate being out of it all—shelved. Wish to God I was in your case! And you can't have the face to pretend you'd sooner be—as I am."

Maurice was lighting a fresh cigarette.

"Honour bright," he said, "I was thinking out there, this afternoon, what a lucky devil you were!"

Mark flashed round on him. "Lucky—*me?*"

"Yes: as things go these days. You're through with the worst of it. You've done jolly well. Your people think no end of you and you'll probably do thundering big things once you get started again. As for me——"

"As for *you*," Mark's friendly tone had a touch of sternness, "you're a graceless ingrate. Your hand's been saved. You've everything before you and your spurs still to win. Strikes me, the sooner I get on with your conversion, all round, the better!"

But later, when Maurice had gone, those astonishing words "lucky devil" returned and walked to and fro in his brain and flashed light into dark corners, where for weeks no light had been. His own tragedy had seemed to him a thing so absolute that he had forgotten in his misery, the relative nature of all sensation: and he frankly admitted, now, that "as these times go" a worse fate might have befallen him. On the wings of imagination, he had explored the long unchanging road ahead of him—and had found it too hard to travel. And again he had forgotten that the actual journey must be taken day by day, mile by mile; that, imperceptibly, the face of that road would change, in response to his own unconquered spirit and the healing influence of time.

Life, that is more inexorable than death, cannot away with that crowning mercy. The veiled hours come to us single file. Were it not so, which of us

would find courage to face them at all? In war, and in the anguish of blows that shatter faith and courage, it is perhaps this crowning mercy that withholds tortured humanity from running headlong down a steep place into the sea——

Mark sat late that night over the red embers of his fire, smoking . . . pondering. . . .

CHAPTER II

"Even the wise man's feet are turned astray
by tumult of the soul."

PINDAR.

ON a certain afternoon of March, Lady Forsyth sat in a third-class carriage of a certain casual train that loafed along the line, these disorganised days, between Waterloo and Westover. She religiously travelled third now, and as religiously put the difference into her war-purse for prisoners. Mark was not told, lest he prove unmanageable: and Keith's objections had been overruled with a high hand.

This particular train was the slowest in the day. Helen never patronised it except from force of circumstances; and she irreverently christened it "the British Government"—not altogether without provocation. For, as the War dragged inconclusively on, and Germans continued to flourish in forbidden areas, in the City, and even in harbours of the first importance, she found herself growing more critical, more intolerant towards that sacrosanct institution. If she could be said to dislike, whole-heartedly, anything in the nature of a human being, it was certain supple, self-regarding phrase-mongers who had been overlong predominant in the Mother of Parliaments.

Hers was not the only heart, in those anxious times,

that cried out for a Triumvirate: a sailor, a soldier, and a genuine statesman to organise all the resources of a great and willing Empire for the salvation of the world. But the cry went up in vain. And still politicians talked and soldiers prayed for the Great Offensive, and the war of trenches and sectors went lumbering on. Constantinople had not fallen within the given month. A feeling hovered in the air that something had gone wrong with this very great adventure; that arrangements had been sketchy; action premature. And there were uncomfortable rumours about the King of Greece——

Then, suddenly, the West had leaped to life. "Victory at last!" sang the posters and the headlines. And the journalists, given a freer hand this time, vied with each other in chronicling Homeric feats and "enormous enemy losses." . . .

That was a week ago. And now it appeared there had been some mistake about this "great and glorious victory." One indisputable fact stood out—the casualty lists. It began to look as if, after all, they were likely to prove the biggest thing about it. Helen Forsyth had heard talk in London that she tried to dismiss as mere pessimism; but her instinct told her it was probably true.

The train groaned and jolted to a standstill:—Little Franton. It was far too courteous to overlook even the smallest thing in stations. Another hour to Westover. Lady Forsyth leaned back and closed her eyes. She had had two strenuous days in town. She was very tired and longing to get home—to Mark. It was still a strange and wonderful fact that home should also mean Mark. He was her private reason

for courting the present infliction. She had failed to catch an earlier express and refused to wait for a later one. It was sufficiently distracting being called away for a night so soon after his return. How they would laugh at her when she got back! And how good it was to be laughed at again: even if, in between, there were still moods of gloomy silence or of irritability, that kept her anxiety at stretch.

The first few days of their frank joy in each other had been flawless. And for her, there was the secret satisfaction of having him all to herself again, with no superfluous Bel to claim the lion's share of his thoughts and heart: a forgivable form of selfishness that perhaps only a mother can condone. But the necessary intrusion of the world at large marked the beginning of trouble. It was plain that he would not easily overcome a certain sensitive shrinking from outside people; though, in his more normal moods, he spurned this weakness and overrode it ruthlessly.

For this reason, visitors—with the exception of Dr. Warburton and the Sinclairs—were not very welcome. Warburton was on the "sick list" combating a severe bout of rheumatism and Sir Nevil, like Mark, was knocked out of the actual fighting, with a frost-bitten foot and his left forearm gone to save the spread of blood poisoning from a septic wound. Wynchmere tenants and workers, eager to come and do him homage, would not be denied; and Mark himself, touched to the heart, was yet consumed with shyness at the prospect of facing the music. A few days ago, with Keith's diplomatic help, Lady Forsyth had persuaded him to summon an informal afternoon gathering—the gamekeeper, the manager of their handicrafts colony, his

better class tenants and their wives. And he had been at his best: friendly, sympathetic, full of humorous talk. She had only discovered the effort it cost him by the reaction that followed: and had reproached herself not a little for having pressed the point.

Keith, however, insisted rightly that the sooner Mark did violence to his natural shrinking the sooner he would conquer it: and conquer it he must. But his recurrent headaches troubled her. She had made a point of seeing Dr. Norton while in town. Her faith in him was implicit and his encouraging view of things had comforted her considerably.

"Give him plenty of fresh air. A little gentle massage. And avoid friction over trifles." That had been the great man's final injunction, heartily endorsed by Helen.

Privately she had feared that the massage part of it might produce friction straightaway: and at lunch, in Mrs. Laurence's war-work flat (Colonel Laurence was serving in France) that fear had been confirmed. Honor Lenox and Sheila, who had struck up a friendship, were lunching there too; and Honor bore witness that, when massage was prescribed at Mavins, Mark had proved intractable.

"I believe if I could have done it myself," she added, "I might have persuaded him. But nothing would induce him to let 'a strange woman maul his head.' And they thought it unadvisable to press the point. But now—why not Sheila? The very person."

Naturally that had been Helen's first thought, and Sheila's also. But the older woman—because of her secret hope—had felt a scrupulous hesitancy about

volunteering the suggestion; and the girl had her own private qualms to overcome. Both were proportionately grateful for Honor's blunt directness, and common-sense, professional point of view. She saw only a man in need of healing and the one acceptable healer happily on the spot: and on the whole, Lady Forsyth felt justified in taking the same view. It had finally been decided that she should sound Mark on the subject and let Sheila know the result.

After all, his complete recovery was a matter of the first importance. She had no sure knowledge of Sheila's heart; and, as regards her own son, she was altogether in the dark. Since that day at the Nursing Home, he had never mentioned Bel: and she devoutly hoped he never gave a thought to that devastating young woman.

Only to-day, she had heard from Lyndsay Laurence that, in January, Bel had deserted Harry O'Neill and gone upon a protracted visit to friends in the west of England where Zeppelins were not. She wasn't afraid of them, Mrs. Laurence had explained with a gleam in her serious blue eyes, she merely objected to living in a Zeppelin area when there were other areas available. Further, it appeared that some casual word let fall by Harry had given Mr. Maitland an inkling of Mark's generosity. Certainly he had spent his holidays in the west of England; had duly proposed to a Bel no longer penniless—and been rejected. Helen was exceedingly glad to hear it. She wondered if Mark would appreciate the humour of it, but dared not risk telling him—yet.

His uncertain moods put a severer strain upon her than she would admit even to herself. Even her long-

ing to get back to him was secretly tinged with dread lest something should upset him and spoil the whole evening. Lately, she had persuaded him to sing again; and sometimes, with that or her own music, she could exorcise the fiends that tormented him. But if any one could spirit them away permanently it would be Sheila: and . . . supposing things went farther still—well, why not? The question had a touch of defiance, as though some unseen mentor had ventured a rebuke. Mentor or no, she could not, or would not see any cause or just impediment. For once in a way, she—who set such store by truth in the inward parts, was not altogether honest with herself: a pardonable lapse, in the circumstances.

Could Mark once be made to realise that a woman loved him enough to marry him, disabled as he was, all his uncertain moods and irritations would vanish into air. In time, she felt convinced, this cruel paralysis would loosen its hold on him; and if Sheila cared sufficiently to take all risks, whose business was it to come between them?

But as usual she was racing ahead miles too fast. Possibly neither of them cared—in that way. Probably Mark would snub the massage idea. More than probably he would now refuse to marry Sheila even if he loved her to distraction. So she swung round again to those jarring uncertainties that threatened, almost, to spoil the joy of getting him back. . . .

At this point her attention was distracted from personal worries by women's voices opposite. One of them she recognised: Mrs. Beck, proprietor of the Post Office and sweet shop at Wynchmere. It was the War, of course. People of all grades and classes

could still talk of little else: and Helen, keeping her eyes shut, dismissed her own anxieties and listened.

It was a compensation for the occasional discomforts of travelling third that one caught glimpses of the War through the eyes of working men and women who neither painted it all red nor garnished it with false sentimentalities; but accepted it—cheerfully, sullenly or doggedly—as one more item among the many bewildering puzzles of life.

Said the voice that was not Mrs. Beck's: "Your son 'as 'e gone back yet to them trenches?"

"No. 'E's not near fit: never *was*," came Mrs. Beck's emphatic tones. "But 'e'll be goin' sure 'nough before long."

"Frettin' to get back, is he? My word, it's no pantomime. I got a brother been out since Christmas. Up to his blessed middle in water. Matches an' fags too damp for strikin'. You do 'ear some tell they want to go back. An' it makes yer wonder——"

"Want to go back? O' *course* they don't: not my boy, nor any of 'em." Mrs. Beck's voice was angry now as well as emphatic. "'Oo could? Them that talks that way says it to hearten their woman folks. But 'tis on'y fools as believes 'em. And most on 'em says nothing. They knows it's *djuty*. So they shuts their teeth an' goes, wonderin' if they'll ever see 'ome again. But they *says nothing*—not they. It's 'ow they're made. There was jest one o' mine did—once. Pore Alf! 'E come clean through Monsse, and all them 'orrors without a scratch. An' when 'e was leavin' 'ome again, I says to 'im, I says: '*You'll* come back for sure. You've a charmed life.' But 'e shook

'is 'ead. 'Their turn last time. Mine next,' 'e said jokin'-like. 'E knew 'e'd be took—and 'e woz."

Followed a sympathetic silence from the mere sister, and Helen—who remembered Alf and all the circumstances—thought shame of herself for allowing Mark's moods to blur the supreme fact that she had him safe—permanently safe—from jagged bayonets, explosive bullets, and all the scientific barbarities that still hurt her soul.

Her one remaining treasure had not been "took." It was enough.

The leisurely train was nearing home now. She sat up and greeted Mrs. Beck; and they talked Neuve Chapelle till the name-board said "Westover" at last.

And there was Keith on the platform and Mark awaiting her in the car, brown and vigorous looking; quite himself again in motor-coat and cap. And she felt more than ever ashamed of fitful repinings.

Mark evinced his joy at her return by keeping a hand on her knee under the fur rug and ragging her mercilessly all the way home. At dinner he was quieter, with the brooding look in his eyes that Helen had learnt to dread. Afterwards Keith settled them in the drawing-room and went off to the library leaving them together.

He had now definitely given up his ambulance work on the other side and divided his time between local recruiting, a committee for the welfare of prisoners, and a deeply thought-out treatise on the psychological effects of war. Underlying all these obvious activities, was the cherished conviction that Helen had need of him; more especially in these first difficult days . . . when Mark must learn, slowly and painfully, the art of

adapting himself to his limited conditions of life. He had never said another word about her to Mark; nor had he found the opportune moment for speaking to her himself. He was hyper-fastidious in respect of that critical moment. Life had, so far, given him no lovelier gift than her frank confidence and comradeship; and he was in no hurry to risk putting them out of gear, even for the sake of that greater gift for which Mark had encouraged him to hope. Moreover, when a lover—and that lover, a Scot—has kept silence for fifteen years, it is almost easier to go on keeping silence than to speak: and Keith Macnair was essentially of those who know how to wait.

The two he had left in the drawing-room fell silent after a little desultory talk. Helen could think of nothing but Sheila. Mark's reviving soul was shadowed by ominous signs of failure at Neuve Chapelle. Names of officers in his own battalion had been painfully prominent in the Roll of Honour: men he had lived with, fought with, and loved. He was girding at his own inability to go out and replace one of them: picturing the welcome they would give him:—Mackail, Fordyce, the Colonel. *His* name was not in the list, thank God. Quite recently the battalion had been made up to strength and given a well-earned rest—only to be decimated afresh. And no victory to show for it: nothing but a costly failure. A bad omen for the Great Offensive that was to sweep the Germans back to the Rhine.

It all hurt him so acutely that he could not manage to talk of it even to his mother: so he fell back on silence.

His quietness was deceptive: his frown might merely mean headache. Helen could not know that the devil within was making peculiarly malignant remarks to him just then: and her very anxiety to choose the right moment made her almost certain to stumble on the wrong one.

"Mums, will you play a little," he said at last, "if you're not too tired?"

She was too tired and she wanted to talk about Sheila: but she did not say so. If he was "brooding," music might be a wise prelude to speech.

For a quarter of an hour or so, she played without her notes; slow soft music. Preludes and Largoes. Then she came back to the fire determined to hesitate no longer. She still remained standing, one foot on the fender-stool.

"I saw Dr. Norton to-day," she remarked casually. "He wanted to hear about you—and the headaches. Swears by two simple remedies; plenty of fresh air—and massage:—the nerves of the head and neck. And afterwards, at the flat, Honor suggested Sheila——"

Mark's frown deepened unpromisingly.

"My dear Mother, *I'm* all right. For God's sake, don't fuss!"

"Darling, I'm not fussing. Dr. Norton prescribed it. And Sheila did wonders for me—after Boulogne."

"I can well believe it. But I won't have her bothered on my account. She's overworked as it is."

"But, Mark, she delights in it," Helen persisted fatally. "And for you, of all people——"

"Yes—for *me* of all people!" Mark flung out with a sudden uncontrollable bitterness that effectually

silenced her. Startled by his vehemence, she could only stand gazing at him, pain and bewilderment in her eyes. But his own pain blinded him to hers and he sharply turned away his head.

"Oh—*don't* look at me like that," he muttered. "You make too much of things. All those poor chaps killed and wounded out there and you're worrying over my twopenny headaches. Let Sheila come—if she's willing and if it'll make you happy."

His mother compressed her lips. "Nothing will make me happy, Mark," she said quietly, "till I see you more nearly your old self again."

"Well, I'll *never* be my old self again—if I live to be eighty: which God forbid!"

The moment the words were out he realised their cruelty. He felt as if he had struck her; and impulsively he put out his hand.

But she had turned from him swiftly to hide her tears—and she was gone.

Helpless to follow her he sat there alone with his bitterness and his shame and his desperate longing for Sheila, that had instinctively prompted him to veto his mother's tempting plan. . . .

Presently the door opened and Keith came in. He looked grave, almost stern.

"What have you been saying to upset Helen?" he asked bluntly. "Couldn't you see she was tired out?"

Beneath the reproof Mark detected the unconscious, possessive note of the lover and responded to it straightway, incurable lover that he was. His faint annoyance at being taken to task evaporated. If any one had hurt Sheila as he had just hurt Mums he would have wanted to commit murder.

"Where is she? What's she doing?" he asked, patently contrite yet vouchsafing no explanation.

"In the library. She *thinks* she's writing letters."

"Did she say anything?"

"Is it likely? What did *you* say? That's the point."

Mark frowned. "Nothing would induce me to repeat it. It was only—she got worrying over my confounded head. Massage and that sort of rot. She's keen for Sheila to come and try her hand on me."

"Well—what's wrong with Sheila?"

"There's nothing wrong with Sheila," Mark answered; and this time the lover's note was in his own voice. "But—at the moment, everything was wrong with me. And, like a coward, I let fly at Mums."

Keith's eyes lightened strangely. "Well, no matter how bad things are with you—and I don't belittle them—I can't have you hurting *her* like that. She's suffered more this winter than you, or any of us, will ever know. Sheila's been no less than an angel of consolation; and if Helen wants her here, let her come. She would probably do you a deal of good. And anyway she'd be a healing influence in the house, which is precisely what you're both needing just now. Mark, old chap, I'm not down on you. But—*you* understand?"

"Yes. I understand."

A pause. Mark felt suddenly tempted, by Keith's change of tone, to break through his own reserve. It would be a vast relief to tell Keith about Sheila and discover his unbiased view of things. But Bel, though no longer loved, still left her trail over his life. Three months ago she was presumably all the world to

him: and now—to make parade of his love for Sheila would seem but a poor compliment: an insult, almost. Hard to make another understand that the two emotions had as little in common as the girls themselves. Still harder to explain that strange, spiritual awakening in France. Obviously, the Fates had decreed that she should come. Let her come then,—and chance the result. They could have devised no finer test for his power of self-mastery.

Keith, who shrewdly suspected the truth, adjusted a blazing log with his foot and said nothing.

"I say, go and tell Mums I want her," Mark said suddenly; and Keith, with a nod of approval, went back to the library.

Mark had time to grow impatient before she reappeared. And, when she did come, he was tongue-tied. He could only hold out his arms——

CHAPTER III

"Through such souls alone
God stooping shows sufficient of his light
For us i' the dark to rise by."

BROWNING.

So Sheila came again to Wynchcombe Friars—the real Wynchcombe Friars; no longer an empty shrine lit by twin lamps of memory and hope. How gladly, how thankfully she answered that summons no one guessed, Mark least of all: and that fact alone made it possible to come. Neither did she herself guess that Keith knew. Her secret was as safe with him as in a tomb: and he it was who, three days later, drove out to fetch her in Mark's two-seater car, in which he was just beginning to reconnoitre his property and look up his tenants as of old.

"If there was a third seat, for the inevitable attendant, I could have fetched her myself," he remarked casually.

"We'll contrive a third seat—for these little emergencies," Keith promised him. "Till then, the privilege must be mine."

Mark and his mother were in the studio when sounds of arrival whisked Helen to her feet. Her natural instinct was to run downstairs and greet them: but she was learning to restrain many such

impulses that Mark might not too acutely feel his minor disabilities.

Presently the door opened and Sheila appeared, glowing from her drive, violet-gowned as on the day he had seen her last: a bunch of violets in her squirrel cap, and distinctly dewy violets in her eyes. The long low room with its restful blue tones and dark oak panelling was flooded with March sunlight, fragrant with the scent of hyacinths that stood about in bowls: and to Mark, the small gallant figure of his first and last allegiance seemed in tune with it all, visibly and vitally, as Bel had never been.

Sheila, for her part, would have summed up her own mixed emotions in the one word "home": the home of her spirit and her heart.

After a swift survey of the room, her eyes rested smiling on Mark in his wheeled chair by the window.

"The quartette complete again, at last, under one roof!" she said, a thrill of gladness in her low voice. Then the underlying tragedy caught at her heart and she took refuge in her Viking. "*He* must be glad to have you back again. Hasn't he told you so?"

"Yes—lately he has," Mark answered, looking at her, not at the Viking, whom it pleased them to regard as a member of the family. "He was a bit reticent at first. But the gladdest of all was Bobs, here. No blooming reticence about him!"

"The darling!" And crouching down Sheila stroked the chestnut head.

The devoted creature lay close pressed against his master's legs, using Mark's feet for a chin-rest; an endearing form of caress. But Mark could not

feel it any more. He sometimes wondered—did the others realise? He hoped they did not.

"I thought the poor little chap would go crazy, the first day," he said. "Kept flinging himself against me with his little shivering squeals, tearing up and down the room, sending the rugs to blazes; asking me, plain as speech, to get up and play the fool with him. Now—he understands and he's just glued to my chair. Won't even go for a walk with Keith. Yes, old man, I'm telling tales of you." This last to Bobs, who glanced upward without shifting his position.

Sheila's eyes were so dewy by this time that she had to make the most of Bobs, who wanted to go to sleep again and found her attentions rather superfluous. He was a man's dog, first and last.

They lunched at the far end of the long room. It was a convenient arrangement for Mark and it economised coal. Every penny that could be saved at Wynchcombe Friars went to help Mark's poorest cottagers and war-increasing colony of refugees, through that first hard winter of war;—a prelude, merely, to the gigantic struggle ahead. Yet there was still a certain amount of loose, comforting talk about the worst being over by the autumn. A good deal of it emanated from those who were resolved to avert conscription at any price—to others. "Traitors' talk," Mark called it bluntly: and in essence it was no less.

Lunch was a brief and cheerful meal: Keith for a wonder being the principal talker. He had gleaned some inside information, from a wounded officer at Winchester, of the dispositions at Neuve Chapelle, and he proceeded to demonstrate them, for Mark's

benefit, with the toast rack, the muffineers, the cake, and several apples, blandly ignoring murmurs from Helen about "the geography of the table."

The meal ended, he retired to the library and his treatise; and Helen went down to interview a refugee dressmaker; a forlorn and pathetic creature in whom she took a very special interest.

"I'll be back soon, my lambs," she said as she went.

There was a perceptible moment of embarrassment; but Sheila swiftly conquered her shyness.

"I don't see anything new here yet," she remarked, glancing round his sanctuary. "And you know I'm expecting—great things!"

Mark shook his head. "I've not touched a bit of clay or plasticine since I got back. But in that folio, there's a big rough crayon of a charging Highlander on a bit of brown board, if you'd care to make his acquaintance."

No need to answer that. She had him out instantly and propped him on an antique table against the wall. Rough he certainly was, but of a vigour and vitality that went far to justify her expectation of great things. No artist by temperament, like Bel, Sheila could neither appraise nor criticise technically: but she had an unerring eye for motive, for the underlying spirit of art in all its manifestations. Certain sketches she had seen at Mavins and this barbaric figure that sprang yelling from the parapet—bayonet fixed, head back, kilt flying—told her that Mark's idealism had gained rather than lost by contact with the uglier, more staggering aspects of life and death. And there can be no sharper test of its quality. Cruel

things, tragic things, seen and suffered, had drawn his Muse closer to earth; had imparted a certain ruthlessness both to his manner and matter: but exultingly she knew that he belonged, and would unfailingly belong, to the great company for whom there is always a window that looks to the sky.

"I saw him—just like that." Mark explained to her silence. "Five minutes afterwards a shell came our way—" an expressive gesture filled the hiatus. "And somehow he stuck in my brain."

"Yes—he would," she said, still dwelling upon him. "Why not make a small statue of him? He is simply —Scotland for ever!"

Mark's eyes were on her face and her low tone thrilled through him.

"He shall be yours—if I ever get him into clay. At present . . . that side of things seems dead."

"Not dead—but sleeping," she said in her softest voice. "It will all come back—bigger and more splendidly alive—when you've struck root again in this dear deserted place."

He sighed. "Hope you're right. I'll need it more than ever I did, once I'm . . . renewed mentally. It isn't an altogether painless process. And I'm no stoic——"

"I expect Mums would tell a different tale," she put in gently.

"Mums would glorify me—from sheer habit! Yet it's she who gets the full benefit of my lapses from stoicism—bless her. It'll be a real service to her if you succeed in exorcising the devil!"

The light in her eyes was enough to banish all the devils in creation—for the moment. "*I* don't believe

in him," she said softly. "I'm going to concentrate on waking up the other thing——"

At this point Lady Forsyth reappeared with her knitting and her *National Review*. She knitted for her war orphans now that spring had smiled upon the sodden trenches "out there."

"Very fine, isn't it?" she said indicating the Highlander, and Sheila nodded.

"He's going to be my first own statue: a bronze."

Then they arranged Mark's invalid table and set a cushion on it. "There," said his mother shaking it up.—"Bow your head upon your arms and try not to feel heart-broken!"

"Try not to feel a fool would be more like it," he grumbled ungratefully. As a matter of fact he found no difficulty in obeying her last injunction. But Bobs, who had been taking stock of these mysterious doings, had his own private opinion on the subject.

Springing up, paws on the table, he anxiously investigated Mark's bowed head and tried to thrust a moist loving nose under his forehead.

"Down, old boy, lie down," Mark muttered; and for the minute he obeyed. But no self-respecting dog could submit to see his master so humiliated. The call for championship was obvious. With little snarling sounds, he sprang up again, snapped at Sheila's hands and nibbled at her ankles half playful, half vicious, and wholly determined to rescue his helpless owner, till Mark flung up his head and laughed. "Officious little beggar! Turn him out, please, Mums." He glanced at Sheila. "I won't have *you* bullied. He tried to eat Macgregor and Keith first time he saw them handle me."

"Macgregor—your sergeant——?"

"Yes. He's knocked out too, poor chap! Lost his foot, after all. But he's a sturdy fellow, so I secured him for my bodyguard and he was no end pleased."

It was a very chastened and reproachful Bobs who at last suffered himself to be forcibly removed from the scene. Mark patted his head by way of explanation: but the rank injustice of the whole proceeding must have galled his faithful soul.

"Now," said Mark the ungrateful, as the door closed on his defender. "Go ahead. It's not half bad!"

In his heart he found in her unerring discovery and manipulation of each sensitive nerve little short of magic. But that sort of thing could not be said. Since his mother's concern was entirely for himself, his own concern must be entirely for Sheila. His will, too long in abeyance, must stand between him and the temptation to discover, by imperceptible means, whether his defection had killed outright the shy response he was just beginning to discern when Bel appeared on the scene. By some means he must contrive to keep the lover's note out of their intercourse. He was glad at least that a deeper expression of brotherly tenderness had crept into his letters from France. It would make things a trifle easier now.

This renewal of intimacy would, he perceived, be no light ordeal; so closely interwoven were the strands of joy and pain. But it was the price of her sweet companionship; and he would pay it willingly, just so long as it involved no risk for her.

To-day, while her fingers made magical passes across his forehead, or fluttered over his head like

soft, strong wings, he had need to reaffirm his resolve: and his best chance of keeping it, though he guessed it not, lay less in the strength of his own will than in Sheila's simplicity and singleness of heart.

For nearly an hour he surrendered himself to the healing influence of her spirit and her touch, till definite thought was stilled and peace flowed through him, as in the days when Sœur Colette had kneeled and prayed beside his bed. . . .

Then it was over; and he was bidden to be quiet till tea-time, while his mother and Sheila strolled on the terrace in the sun. Helen tilted back his adjustable chair, rearranged his cushion and lightly kissed his forehead.

"Didn't I do well to insist?" she asked smiling; and he smiled back at her without a word.

Keith came in for tea; and before it was over, Dr. Warburton appeared. The illusion of old times was strong upon them all. Except for war-talk and Mark's wheeled chair, it was almost as if their summer and winter of tragic memory had never been. But the fact that Sheila must leave them broke the spell.

"Till Wednesday," Mark said at parting. "And one of these days I swear I'll kick over the traces and come for you myself."

To that announcement she had no ready-made answer at command.

"It's lovely to be home again—and spoilt again," she remarked irrelevantly to whom it might concern. "And remember,—*I* expect to find something begun if it's only a terra-cotta trifle."

•

On Wednesday she returned to find the terra-cotta

trifle awaiting her on his modelling table that had stood empty since the outbreak of war. It was a rugged and very vital study of Bobs in a gamesome mood; hindquarters in the air, shoulders down, head laid sideways between outflung paws and an upward glance of appeal from his only visible eye.

Beneath him, on the pedestal, Mark had scratched the words: "St. Roberts the Blest. An invitation to play the fool!"

"Yours," he said as she stood before it, entranced.

"Mark! You don't mean it!" But she knew very well that he did, and her heart sang for joy.

"Done to order," he explained gravely. "The first fruits of your magic."

At that she took it up between her hands and held it for a moment against her cheek.

"It's a lovesome thing.—And there'll be bigger fruits still in a few weeks' time."

"I'm . . . not so sure," he said slowly. "It was mostly my long tramps that brought the big inspirations."

He was forcing himself, these days, to speak naturally and casually of his tragic disability; but he had not yet been so frank with Sheila and she winced in spite of herself. Too well she remembered his boyish delight when he persuaded his father to lengthen the studio by throwing two rooms into one, and how he had declared that merely from the extra space for prowling there would spring a masterpiece. And he had always worked standing. In absence she instinctively pictured him on his feet. Even now——

Yet, if he could face things and speak of it all like this, she must face them too. . . .

"I believe when . . . genius really comes alive

again, it will override everything," she said in a voice of subdued conviction. "I'm not just prophesying smooth things. I'm confessing . . . the faith that is in me."

Mark was silent. He dared not speak. He dared hardly look at her, lest she read the worship in his eyes.

Lady Forsyth, being in no wise hampered, impulsively held out her hands.

"Darling, you and I are of one faith," she said: and Sheila swept to her and kneeled beside her, glad to hide her face a moment against the shoulder of Mark's mother.

After that, she came again and again, and the effect on Mark's temper and spirits was obvious to all. She was not merely a healing influence, but a source of inspiration; an incentive to renewed effort, to a more purposeful grip on the far from futile activities that still remained to him.

Inevitably he found himself contrasting the high felicity of this girl's companionship with that other who had led him hopelessly astray from the path of true happiness. On the one hand a spell, a desire, a troubled unsatisfying charm: on the other, a real woman's heart,—gracious, consoling, understanding, that rang true to every testing touch, and would, he felt convinced, could he test her to the uttermost. If, at times, Sheila seemed narrow where Bel was diffused, she had the higher merit of being deep where Bel was shallow. While there was scarcely a surface in life or art that Bel had not skimmed, she had penetrated nowhere. Sheila—ignorant of much that the modern girl deems essential to her equipment

for life—was yet profoundly versed in the eternal lore of the heart. Bel could never let a man forget he was primarily a man and she primarily a woman: whereas, some finer quality in Sheila enabled Mark to rest content—almost—with the enchantment of her voice, her eyes and the fellowship of her spirit. For all that, there were moments when he wondered how much longer he could keep it up——

And again Sheila, though he did not guess it, was his best safeguard. She had come, simply and gladly, without after-thought, convinced that she could heal his hurt spirit, though his body was beyond her help.

For the moment, it sufficed that she was privileged through her own gift of healing, to revive his greater gift of creation: and to that end she marshalled all the forces of her still, strong nature. Self-dedicated to his service, the unspoken prayer of her spirit was the prayer of Theodolind, the mystic: "Give me wings of great desire, lest I look within and fail." And gradually, unconsciously, she imparted something of her exalted mood to Mark. A growing conviction that this blessed state of things involved no danger to her, gave him fresh courage to control his own emotion lest he lose the best he had any right to ask of her now.

So, for awhile, things went well at Wynchcombe Friars: and for Lady Forsyth those last two weeks of March were the happiest, the most hopeful, she had known since Mark's return from France.

He had reverted, by now, to his old keen interest in the management of his property; and began to enjoy driving with Russell through his woods and farm-

lands, and supervising his handicrafts colony, chiefly given over to French and Flemish refugees. Since no son of his would ever reign at Wynchcombe Friars, he was the more zealous to do his utmost—while time and opportunity were given him—for the people and the land he loved. In this way he grew to be aware that his tenants and workers regarded him with a new and peculiar devotion, often touchingly exhibited, inexpressive creatures though they were by heritage and habit. He was even persuaded to put in an appearance at a big recruiting demonstration at Winchester, where he called upon Jevons, the bootmaker, to the old man's huge delight. He read voraciously and played chess with his mother; though in their case, it was apt to become a prolonged argument rather than a game. He also started a bust of Keith, who quarrelled with his undiscerning choice of a subject and in secret was mightily pleased at the compliment.

Mark did not fail to note his mother's eager interest in this new venture: or the pains she was at not to let it be suspected. It set him wondering what on earth the dear good fellow was up to—he that was free to go in and win the woman of his heart.

March departed lamblike; and April came in with primroses and violets and dappled skies; with coral buds on the wild almond at the end of the terrace, and the gleam of young leaves on black boughs.

April was Mark's own month and for him there was none like it in all the year. He too felt the leap of new life and hope within him: and Sheila began to talk of getting leave for her promised visit.

But, before her dream came true, that stir of new life, within and without, precipitated a crisis—almost inevitable between unavowed lovers, using the language of friendship and thinking the thoughts of love. It came precisely when and precisely because increasing confidence and intimacy had thrown them a little off their guard.

Upon the afternoon of Sheila's seventh visit they were left practically alone. Keith had driven Lady Forsyth over to Bramleigh Beeches to meet a distinguished Indian poetess, who had expressed admiration of Helen's small volume of French and Belgian War poems. These she had translated during the winter to keep her mind from brooding on Mark and to raise extra money for their refugees. Helen was eager to meet the little lady who had written so charmingly about her work; and they left early that Keith might be back in time to drive Sheila home.

Mark's elation should have warned him that there was peculiar need for caution and control. But the wine of spring sparkled in his veins. The air was full of love-songs and Te Deums. Daffodil buds were breaking and the first butterflies were out. All the morning he had been scouring the country with Keith in the little car that was now the joy of his life: and an afternoon alone with Sheila fittingly crowned his content.

When massage was over, he voted for tea at the south-west corner of the terrace where they would secure the last of the sun.

"A Japanese tea-party," said Sheila, "to worship the almond blossom!"

Mark privately added another object of worship,

no less emblematic of spring. For Sheila, happy in her devotion and in her power of healing, was emerging from the shadow of her double loss; shyly watching, at last, the dawning of her secret hope. Her eyes and skin were clearer, her cheeks less pale, her beauty and her spirit seemed visibly to blossom with the blossoming year. Her delight in the day and the occasion was no less than Mark's, but it was of a stiller quality.

They carried him down to the terrace, chair and all; and there, established in the sunny corner, watched over by the almond tree, she made tea for him and told stories of her other patients, whom she was neglecting a little these days.

More by instinct than design, they kept their talk in a lighter vein than usual; and Bobs, as gay as either of them, proved very serviceable in this respect.

Suddenly there flashed on Mark a memory of that other picnic on the shore of Loch Etive: the love-making, the conscious coquetry; the first intimation of underlying rocks that would have wrecked their ship of marriage. Summarily he dismissed the intrusive reminder, that made him angry with himself, angrier still with Bel and her shallow witchery. Yet the indelible shadow of what had been lay right across his path. Painfully he was learning that "the whole life is mixed; the mocking Past will stay."

But this afternoon he would have none of it——

Hester had come out to remove the tea-things and she brought a letter for Mark from Colonel Munro. When he looked up from reading it, Sheila sat lost in thought, one elbow on the empty tea-table, looking away across the valley, where a gap in the pine woods

revealed a glimpse of blue distance clear against the evening sky.

For a space he watched her, till he dared watch no longer. Then: "Mouse," he said very quietly, "what are you brooding on so deeply?"

And she answered him, as quietly, in one word. "Ralph."

Her tone in speaking of that very ordinary, very brave and beloved brother gave Mark always a sense of standing on sacred ground. He said nothing; and after a pause she sighed and sat upright in her low straightbacked chair resting her arms on the table, her hands loosely clasped.

On the middle finger of her left hand she wore a curious, antique ring; a Christmas present from her absentee father.

"A day like this is double-edged, isn't it? It seems to stir all the deeps—joy and pain. He was such a dear simple thing. So close to earth, loving it all so. And yet—the other was what he wished. Just when you spoke I was thinking of that wonderful Roumanian ballad, the dead soldier who was content: the last lines—you know, when he asks the passers-by are they remembering him?

> "'"Not so, my hero," the lovers said,
> "We are those who remember not.
> For the Spring has come and the Earth has smiled
> And the dead must be forgot."
> And the soldier spake from the deep dark grave—
> "I am content!" ' "

At the last, her voice shook so that there was a moment of silence before she added: "I believe

that's what most of them would say—our 'noble army of martyrs'— if only we could hear——"

"Yes: most of them," Mark answered slowly, with quiet conviction. "And on the whole, I'm not sure . . . they haven't the best of it."

She turned quickly and met his direct gaze. "*You* mustn't say that."

"I don't—to the others. But I feel it—pretty acutely . . . sometimes."

"Not so often—now."

It was a statement rather than a question.

"Not nearly so often. That's your doing."

Her deep blush so startled him that he promptly took refuge in generalities:—the effect of the war on character, national and individual: which tendency would prevail on the whole, the spiritual exaltation of a high purpose and tragedy nobly borne; or demoralisation from sheer horror and strain? Maurice Lenox, for instance, how would he and his type eventually emerge from the war? And even where there had been a genuine uplift, would it last? Or, would the pendulum swing back farther than ever, if the struggle dragged endlessly, sullenly on?

Sheila admitted reluctantly that the pendulum had to be reckoned with. She was thinking of Seldon and of Bel: and some hidden channel of communion conveyed her thought to Mark. He had heard of Seldon from Ralph at Inveraig and again, lately, from his mother. But he had no idea how far things had ever gone between them and he very much wanted to know. He had no business whatever to be jealous of the man; but he was fiercely jealous, none the less.

"How about that particular friend of yours, Seldon?" he asked casually. "Mums told me you had him here. Quite regenerate. All your achievement —what d'you think? Will it last?"

She started and looked up. "How odd you should speak of him. He was in my mind."

"*Why* was he in your mind?"

Jealousy flashed out in spite of him: and she smiled.

"Isn't he allowed to be?"

"I'm not sure. Depends how he's going to behave himself!" The chaffing tone was deliberately assumed. "As a patient——"

"Oh, he's not *my* patient any more," she put in quickly. "But I'm bothered about him all the same."

"Why? *Isn't* it going to last?"

"He'll go out again. At least, I believe he will," she answered evasively. "Motor transport, he says. He can't do despatch riding any more."

"Still writes to you, does he?"

"Not very often—now." She paused; longing to tell him everything; yet doubtful, still, whether any shred of feeling remained for Bel.

"And . . . he doesn't want to marry you?" Mark asked irrelevantly. He simply had to know.

"He did. That was the beginning of it."

"Of what?—The drink? Because you wouldn't have him?"

"Mark—that's an insult!" But it was useless pretending to be angry. The discovery that he could be jealous, even half in joke, sent her spirits up with a run. "Someone else was responsible for that, thank goodness. And unluckily, he's come across her again.

I'm not at all happy about it; and I don't think he is either."

"Wrong sort, is she?"

"M-yes. I don't believe she wants him. Yet—she's holding him in spite of himself."

"Poor devil!" Mark was quite ready now to extend the hand of sympathy. "*I* know—all about that." He spoke slowly and with emphasis. He had decided, on the spur of the moment, to break through his misleading silence about Bel; to explain frankly the process and the completeness of his disenchantment. She must know. She had the right to know: she, whom he had so cavalierly deserted, after their names had been coupled by relatives and friends. Though power to make reparation was denied him, he felt imperatively that she must know.

So, after a pause, he went on, with the same slow emphasis: "You see—perhaps you *did* see—Miss Alison was that sort."

The formal name, so casually spoken, sounded very strange on his lips; and her heart, that was now in a troublesome state of commotion, rejoiced to hear it. "Yes: I did see—afterwards," she said in her quietest voice. "Not at first."

"Nor did I—at first. In fact, not clearly, till I got out to France. Machine-guns and high explosives play havoc with more than the landscape and the human envelope. They smash up unrealities and readjust all the values. Oh yes, out there one saw things clear—horrid clear. Her letters too . . . " he paused. "And all those weeks, when . . . I was dead, when I seemed to have no real link with anything, any one but that devoted little nun.

Her saintliness, her simplicity . . . made things clearer than ever. I saw—" he paused, looking down into the heart of the wood; tempted beyond measure to defy Fate and iron decrees and tell her *all* he had seen in those strange days, when his lips were closed and his eyes were dazzlingly opened to the truth. The one thing he did not see at that moment, fortunately perhaps, was Sheila's face, bright with the dawn of realisation, of an almost incredible hope. "I saw," he repeated in a low, impersonal tone, as if talking to himself, "how rootless our whole relation was and always had been. She never reached the depths. Didn't want to. She had no earthly use for them. Her effect on me was an artificial stimulus all along. Mind, I'm not excusing myself. It's no credit to me that she could and did take such a hold. And I came very near marrying her before I went out. Makes me shiver now to think of it: for her sake as much as my own. Dangerous things, these war marriages. I've heard of some painful cases.—Then, when I came back, there she was—irresistible as ever. But the something in me that couldn't resist her had been burnt away—out there. Then they told me I was a permanent crock. . . . No choice—after that. Marrying days were over." A pause. "Perhaps, after all, it's worth being smashed up, like this, to save one's soul alive. There—now you know. I've been wanting to tell you . . . all that this long while."

"And I've been badly . . . wanting to know," she admitted very softly; but his quick ear caught a new vibration in her voice. Startled out of his passing relief, he turned swiftly and was confronted by a transfigured Sheila, gifts in her eyes, the colour rising

in her cheeks. For her there was no iron decree. Heart and soul she was ready. And Mark, for one measureless moment, sat there tongue-tied, realising what he had done, realising still more acutely what he dared not do. . . . With a supreme effort he forced himself to look away from her.

"I was *right* when I said . . . just now . . . the dead have the best of it," he muttered in a tone of concentrated bitterness.

Sheila sat silent, motionless. It was as if with one hand he had lifted her to heaven and with the other had flung her back into the dust— Her eyes were blinded so that she could not see the pain in his face: and suddenly her ears caught the purr of the motor coming down the drive.

"Ah—there they are!" It was Mark who spoke.

Sheila heard the note of relief in his voice and it cut her to the heart.

Without a word she rose and went to meet them——

CHAPTER IV

"A seed of fire is in the human soul
That tears can quench not. . . ."

F. W. B.

HELEN, herself, had seen at a glance that something was wrong: very wrong indeed. When the two were gone, she returned to Mark with a flutter of trepidation at her heart.

Sheila cared. By this time she was convinced of it. And Mark? Once already, in his blindness, he had flung aside this jewel of a girl. Did he mean to do it a second time open-eyed, because his body had suffered shipwreck in the service of his country? If he had got that resolve in his brain, she foreknew the futility of argument. Yet—given the chance and the facts—she was prepared to fight it out with him, for Sheila's sake no less than his own.

But it was for him to speak first; and she feared his silence.

During her absence he had wheeled himself along the terrace and back again to that fatal corner, where a ghostly Sheila still sat in the empty chair, her arms resting on the table, a light of unearthly beauty in her eyes. His face wore the hard closed-up look that his mother had not seen for weeks. Casual talk about Bramleigh Beeches was sheerly impossible.

"My darling, what *has* gone wrong?" she made bold to ask.

He frowned and set his teeth. "Everything. Too perfect to last. I might have known it." He looked about him uneasily. "We can't talk out here. Let's get indoors."

They proceeded to get indoors accordingly; and there by the freshly crackling drawing-room fire it was possible to talk. Mark lit a cigarette to steady himself. Lady Forsyth sat in her favourite small chair, warming her hands, that always went cold under stress of emotion.

"Mark, did you speak to her?" she asked quietly.

"I came within an ace of it—God forgive me!"

Those three words confirmed her worst fears. But she could say nothing yet. Her heart was beating fast. It was a distressing symptom, greatly increased by months of anxiety and the ceaseless strain of the war.

So she remained silent, awaiting further revelations. And after a pause Mark went on:—"I deserve a thorough good kicking. Wish I'd a father to give it me. Perhaps Keith will. I'm not blaming you, Mums. This massage business has done me no end of good. But in every other respect it's been the very devil. As for *her*—she's the most perfect thing God ever made. And I'm afraid . . . I'm horribly afraid . . . she cares. The look in her eyes dumbfounded me. There was no choice between a clean cut . . . and surrender. . . ."

"And why *not* surrender?" his mother ventured, fearful yet undaunted. "Honestly I believe—it would be better and happier for us all."

At that the stifled flame in him leaped out even as she had feared.

"Better for *me* . . . for you. That's the extent of your honest belief. Mums, you're not facing this business straight: though you think you are. You're just a dear devoted mother-woman. Whatever your son cries for, from a Noah's ark to a wife, you'll move heaven and earth to get it for him at any cost—to any one. And I love you for it. But you can't expect me, always, to see it the same way. I'm considering Sheila and no one but Sheila——"

"My dear boy, *I'm* considering her too!" his mother cried out, unable to endure that last reproach. "I've been doing so a good deal longer than you have: and, believe it or not, my understanding of her goes deeper than yours. I'm a woman. She's a woman——"

"*There* you are!" Mark fairly took the word out of her mouth. "It's because she's so divinely a woman that I refuse to let her in for . . . a travesty of a marriage. A girl like that was created for better things than dancing attendance on a broken man. It would be a sin. You know that as well as I do."

She was silent a moment, recognising that he spoke the truth: one side of it. But even while she loved and honoured him for his refusal, conviction remained that Sheila, if she really cared, would recognise no obstacles.

"But, dear, after all, things aren't quite past mending," she urged in a quieter tone. "Surely Sheila has the right to know you love her, and to make her own choice."

Mark shook his head. "She wouldn't think things out. And she'd be too tender-hearted to refuse.—As

for me, there probably will be improvement, of sorts. But, so far as I can see, the chances are I'll never be a whole man again: and I don't see myself marrying Sheila, on the off chance——"

"Oh—you're hopeless! And *she's* helpless, poor darling! Why must we wretched women always be dumb on this matter that concerns us above everything else? She ought to be allowed to take the initiative in a case like this."

"Just as well for me that she isn't," Mark muttered grimly. But she detected in his voice the mere ghost of a vibration, and a wild hope leaped in her heart. Sheila might move him, or Keith——

At this point Mark leaned forward suddenly and flung away his cigarette.

"Don't let's talk of this again, Mums," he said, more gently than he had spoken yet. "It hurts us both too much. Also it's futile. Nothing on earth would induce me to offer Sheila—damaged goods: damaged in every sense. I'm the sinner first and last. When I ought to have been at her feet, I was wasting my substance on . . . Miss Alison. Oh yes . . . you knew . . . you're welcome to your private triumph."

"My son—it's *no* triumph," she broke out bitterly. "It's torment. I would sooner have been entirely wrong and that Bel should have turned out worthy of your chivalrous love——"

"Well, *I* wouldn't," he contradicted her inevitably. "I wouldn't sooner anything that might have robbed me of discovering Sheila as I've been discovering her these few weeks; even though it's made things in general ten times harder to bear. She's a perpetual

inspiration. A light of earth. If she were *only* that—! But she's more. And so . . . she's not for me. Possibly I was mistaken this afternoon. It might have been . . . just her heavenly sympathy. I hope to God it was! We'll run no more risks, anyway. If she gets this leave of hers, I'd better go off on some sort of tour with Keith:—doctor's orders! If he's too busy, the Sinclairs might put up with me for a bit, or Uncle John down at Weymouth. The farther the better. We must furbish up some sort of presentable excuse. It's pretty detestable, just when things in general seemed to be taking a real lift all round."

And his mother sat listening to it all, mute and miserable, envisaging the spring and summer—that had seemed to promise resurrection—darkened by this fresh tragedy. She knew, now, just how high hope had risen of late.

"And is this sort of thing . . . to be permanent?" she asked, with a sigh of utter weariness.

He turned and regarded her reproachfully, the faintest flicker of humour in his grave eyes. "My dear Mums, I sometimes wonder if you really *have* walked this earth for fifty years! Is anything ever permanent —except change? I suppose . . . we shall both shake down in time and accept the horrid fact. But at present, as things stand, the less she sees of me the better. She ought—to marry. And she probably will. Oh *God!*"

The last words were no more than a fierce whisper, and his hand closed sharply on the arm of his chair.

His mother neither moved nor spoke. She leaned forward over the fire, her face half turned away from him, thankful the lights were not switched on.

But although no sob escaped her, Mark knew very well that she was crying. In other circumstances he would have been on his knees beside her. As it was, he sat there dumb; chained to the accursed chair, raging at his helplessness; raging still more at his very belated readiness to fulfil her heart's desire.

Soon she rose hurriedly, murmured something about coming back soon, and left him. . . .

They were alone that evening. Keith was dining at Wynchmere and speaking afterwards at the Working Man's Club on ambulance driving in France. They missed him badly, both of them. It is often the way with such quiet, unobtrusive natures. Keith and Sheila were alike in that respect: and all through dinner, both were vividly present to the minds of mother and son. But their talk in the main was of Bramleigh Beeches, Indian genius, and the poetry of Tagore.

After dinner Mark asked for *Sadhāna* and music. He wanted to escape from talk that could not, just then, be anything but a mere makeshift between them: a state of things unnatural and intolerable to both. While his mother played Grieg and Beethoven, he opened his book haphazard at the poet's exquisite clear-eyed discourse on "Realisation in Love."

"Our individual soul," he read, "has been separated from the Supreme Soul not from alienation, but from fulness of love. It is for this reason that untruths, sufferings, and evil are not at a standstill: the human soul can defy them, can overcome them; nay, can altogether transform them into new power and beauty. . . ."

Mark pondered that sentence a long while. It was like a light flashed upon the dark path before him; like the voice of God in his own soul, saying, "This do and thou shalt live." His faith in the Unseen was, like that of most Britons, an inarticulate and very hidden thing. But his brief, strenuous spell of service, followed by weeks of intimate, yet unspoken communion with the passionate soul of one small French nun, had intensified his inner vision and deepened the measure of faith that was in him. To-night he recognised and accepted the task assigned him; recognised also that, just in so far as he fulfilled it, he would be still able to serve his country and his own people, in defiance of his handicap. The struggle between spirit and matter, that had hitherto been the keynote of his art, must now become the keynote of his life. . . . "Unconquering, yet unconquered. . . ." Stevenson knew.

Yet still his desolate, rebellious heart cried out that *with Sheila* any achievement were possible: without her the future loomed dark and formless, a night devoid of stars. . . .

Punctually at ten he asked to be taken up to bed. When he was gone, the house felt so silent and empty that Helen fled for refuge to her own room and her own fire. Anxious and disheartened by this fresh trouble, she clung to the thought of Keith as a shipwrecked man to a spar. Her own pleading was vitiated—no denying it—by the mere fact of her motherhood. Keith could speak more impartially, more frankly, as one man to another. She wanted to see him, and unburden her heart to him before she slept. But he expected to be late and had begged her not to sit up.

Besides, he would be tired and it would not be fair on him. She must have patience till the morning. Her rebel spirit was being drilled into patience these days.

The door into Mark's room was shut. It most often had to be, now. But she heard no sound of footsteps. The men had evidently left him. Should she go in and say good night? Her heart yearned over him; and it was hateful to feel unsure of her welcome. Did he guess how acutely she missed his casual wanderings in and out; the arguments, the "ragging," and the dear delights of their ancient comradeship, that almost seemed to belong to another life?

Latterly, under Sheila's reviving influence, the old happy relation had been renewed with a difference. It was she who now went in to him for early tea, when he did not peremptorily order her back lest she catch cold; and the "hair-brush interview" often took place beside his bed. Being dependent on the men, he could not sit up till all hours. Now, to-day—just as hope was sending green shoots into the sunshine—she felt jerked back into the miseries and uncertainties of a winter that she would fain wipe clean out of her memory.

Finally, she decided to go in to him and chance the result.

The comfort of finding she was welcome would be worth the risk.

His room was in darkness: curtains drawn back, windows flung open, revealing a strip of starry sky and black pine branches blotting out a constellation or two. The light from her own room guided her to his bed.

He said not a word. But his arms came out to greet

her; and he drew her down, clinging to her, as he had never done in the days before War had crippled his strong, shapely body and shaken his nerves.

"I thought—you had forgotten," he said at last.

"And *I* thought perhaps—you would rather not."

He tightened his hold. "I forbid you to think that, ever. No matter what the devil inside me may say or do. A nice sort of curse I am to you, little Mums."

"You're the dearest blessing of my life," she answered, her cheek against his.

It was some time before he let her go: but neither of them spoke the word uppermost in their minds.

She left him at last, with his fervent "God bless you" in her ears and hope renewed in her heart. Sheila—if she loved him sufficiently—must win in the end.

CHAPTER V

"Yea, there shall be a time that shall lay hold on a man unaware and shall give him one thing beyond his hope."—PINDAR.

SHE woke late, after a restless night, to find letters already on her tray and the housemaid at her washing-stand.

In her room, as in Mark's, there was never any need for drawing back curtains or opening windows to let in the morning. Winter and summer she performed both offices herself before going to sleep. For her, boxed-up bedrooms, stuffily curtained, were anathema. Nature's night was a thing of brooding beauty; and the stars were her friends. If she woke in the small hours, a frequent event, she liked to find them looking in on her, to see them glimmering like Christmas candles through the blackness of her sentinel pines.

Now the birds were making music in their branches, and the stars had long since been blown out by the sun.

"Has Sir Mark had his tea?" she asked, as the maid went out.

"No, my lady: he's still asleep."

"Tell Macgregor not to disturb him."

That meant—a bad night: for he was an early waker. And, for all her devotion, she could do practically nothing to ease his misery. It is one of the hardest though perhaps not the least salutary laws of life.

She lit her spirit lamp and took up her letters. One of them was from Mrs. Melrose: an unusual event. In spite of the link between their children, and the natural inference that some day Sheila would marry Mark, these two were not friends. They were merely life-long acquaintances. But Mrs. Melrose, like many of her kind, could slip on the cloak of friendship when it happened to serve her purpose. And it served her purpose now.

"My dear Lady Forsyth," she wrote—"I've been feeling rather concerned lately about our Sheila and her future prospects. I say 'our,' because, by her own choice, she seems to belong almost as much to you as to her father and me. But—after all—she *is* mine. I am responsible for her welfare. And as we are such very old friends, I am going to write to you quite frankly on the subject of her possible marriage. Of course I know how you discourage gossip in every shape and form, but you are, no doubt, aware that for a long time Sheila's name was coupled with Mark's all over the neighbourhood. Quite natural—you must admit. And if Mark had not suddenly gone off at a tangent in another direction, I wouldn't have given the matter a thought. I am far too busy to worry over trifles."

("Too busy to win your daughter's confidence or her heart!" was Helen's mental interjection.)

"But even in these casual days, it does not improve a girl's chances if her name is bandied about, coupled with this man and that. Last autumn there

was that Mr. Seldon. Now I hear *he* is running after Miss Alison. She seems a dangerous young woman.

"But what chiefly worries me is this. I discovered the other day that people round here are again speculating about Sheila and Mark. And I am sure, dear Lady Forsyth, you will agree with me that this won't do at all. Mind, I am not saying a word against Mark. But I do think that, for Sheila's sake, he should be careful not to set people talking again in that way, as he would not, I feel sure, think of asking her to marry him, now. To be quite frank, neither her father nor I would wish it. And I feel sure *you* would not wish it either——"

At this point Helen flushed furiously. Those velvety phrases barely concealed the direct hit at herself: but the next few sentences so startled her that she almost forgot to be angry

"Personally, in strict confidence, I am convinced that Mr. Macnair is seriously *épris* with our little girl. Surely you must have noticed it yourself? And nothing would delight me more. He is clever, charming, eligible in every way. I thought of it first when he began teaching her to drive. And it has been very marked since his return from France. I have said nothing yet, to Sheila herself. She is difficult about such things; so shut in. Her Melrose grandmother all over. And Mr. Macnair is so modest. The sort of man who needs a certain amount of *discreet* encouragement. But darling Sheila is rather a little fool in that way. I've told her more than once her pride will be her ruin! Now she talks about spending her leave at

Wynchcombe Friars. This would be *such* a good chance to complete matters and put an end to all this gossip, that I hope I am not presuming on our friendship, if I ask you to give them both a *little* push in the right direction—quite unobtrusively, as only an older woman can. It's all they need, dear foolish creatures, and I may add you would earn my eternal gratitude. Forgive me if I have written too frankly. But being a mother yourself, I am *sure* you will understand. So glad to hear from Sheila that Mark is really better in every way.

"Yours most sincerely,

"ADELA MELROSE."

It is hardly too much to say that before Helen Forsyth reached the end of that amazing burst of confidence, she had a sudden dizzying sensation of seeing the world, her familiar home-world, the wrong side up. Keith and Sheila—whom she had always regarded as belonging respectively to herself and Mark! And she—with her tragic knowledge of her son's belated awakening—was to give those two the "little push" that would send them into each other's arms!

Once or twice, at Boulogne, she remembered, this very idea had dimly occurred to her. But now—coming from Mrs. Melrose of all people—she found it intolerable.. She resented it vehemently; and not on Mark's account alone. Yet the disconcerting fact remained that Keith might hold other views on the subject. She had always been sceptical over Mark's nonsense about herself. At least—until this bewilder-

ing moment—she had honestly believed in her own scepticism. She had put the idea away from her and thanked God for the treasure of Keith's devoted friendship. But this morning she perceived, for the first time, that she was not at all prepared for his falling in love elsewhere.

Was she fundamentally given to self-deception, without knowing it—she who set such store by sincerity of soul? Only last night Mark had turned another of her "honest beliefs" inside out. What would he say to this?

And Sheila herself? Incredible!

Distracted by conflicting emotions and utterly perplexed, she leaned back among her pillows. There could be no peace, on her own account or Mark's, till she had got at the truth. But—a gleam of humour flashed through her dismay—how was it to be done? Wire to Sheila: "Are you in love with Keith?"? Ask Keith over his coffee and newspaper: "Are you in love with Sheila?"? Confront each with the other on Wednesday, and say point-blank: "Look here, if you two want to marry, Mark and I have no objections to make"?

Perhaps they were hesitating on that score. It would be just like them. And as to Keith, there was no denying that Mrs. Melrose had a case. He had never disguised his admiration for Sheila. Words and incidents, unnoticed at the time, came crowding back to her memory——

It was mainly to Sheila that Helen looked for reprieve, especially after last night. Yet, if she went to Mark now, with this Melrose fantasy, he would simply say: "What did I tell you? The real mother

has a natural eye to Sheila's real interests. If there's a ghost of a chance for Keith, let the whole man win her if he can."

Yes. Mark would say that: and he would be right.

Of a sudden, she felt heartily ashamed of herself. What was it she had said to Sheila at Inveraig?—"Be as kind as you please to your poor things so long as you stop short of marrying them." Yet when it came to her own son, she was ready to eat her counsel without compunction. But then—Mark was Mark. And if Sheila loved him—if she preferred mothering her one disabled hero——?

If—if! She was simply back again at her argument of last night. Till she knew the facts, speculation was futile. And until she did know, she would certainly say nothing to Mark. Keith, as usual, was her city of refuge. After breakfast she would get him away alone and tell him everything. If necessary, she would even show him that detestable letter. . . .

At breakfast in the study they talked war news and Government delays and the Great Offensive, that appeared to have been slain either by bad Staff work, or by lack of ammunition and shells. And while they talked, Helen was surreptitiously watching Keith's lean, thoughtful face, with awakened eyes; listening to the even quiet of his voice with new ears. And all the time she was telling herself sternly that perhaps this very Keith, her own peculiar property, was in love with Sheila.

When at last he went down to the library, she followed him at a casual distance. He had just grasped the door-handle when she reached the last of the stairs.

"Keith," she called; and he turned quickly. "I've had a letter that puzzles me rather. Can you spare me a few minutes?"

"The whole morning if you like."

There was no fervour in his tone. He simply stated an obvious fact.

"Well, come out on the terrace and bask in this lovely day. When the sun is kind enough to take notice of England we ought to give him every encouragement!"

She talked on rather rapidly for the sake of saying something and keeping nervousness at bay. She had a deep respect for the reserves of her men-folk: and now, too late, she shrank from laying a finger on the curtain that hid the real Keith from her. Outside on the terrace she fell silent till they reached the far corner, where Mark and Sheila had parted so abruptly the day before.

"Well—what about your letter?" he asked, an amused note in his voice. It was so like Helen to ask for an urgent few minutes and then talk about April sunshine. It was the sort of thing that made her at once so aggravating and so lovable.

No escape now; and she plunged headlong.

"It's from Mrs. Melrose. She has an idea . . . she says . . . you and Sheila. . . ." Quite useless. She could get no further. "I think," she added, handing him that innocuous-looking bombshell, "you'd better read it for yourself."

Mystified by her manner and mildly curious, he obeyed: and she, feeling uncomfortably shaky, half sat on the edge of the stone balustrade, watching his face for some sign of confirmation or reprieve. She

saw his eyebrows go up, then draw together in a sharp frown. Then there leaped a flame in his grey eyes such as she had seen once or twice at Boulogne when he came into collision with immobile Authority. Finally she saw a dull flush creep into his face:—anger or emotion? It was hard to tell. The curtain was not lifted—yet.

Quite suddenly, he looked up and caught her eyes on him.

"Has the woman taken leave of her senses?" he asked, in a dazed voice. "Sheer insolence—all that twaddle about Mark. As for the rest—" He paused, and his flush deepened. "Sheila and I are quite capable of managing our own affairs without her inspired assistance."

"Precisely what I thought," Helen murmured. That "Sheila and I" produced a horrid sinking at her heart.

"*You?* What have you been thinking?"

"A good deal . . . since I read that letter." And the pang she had no business to feel gave her courage to go on: "Keith, if it's true . . . what Mrs. Melrose says, *I* want to say . . . on my own account, that you need have no hesitation in this matter, because of Mark. He . . . he only spoke of it yesterday. He feels . . . he has no right. I confess I had hoped—but . . . we both care so immensely for you two. . . ."

"That you are graciously willing to fling us at each other's heads," Keith broke out angrily, "at the instigation of this impertinent woman. Upon my word, Helen, I stand confounded——!"

She also stood confounded. Anger from Keith was

more than she had bargained for: and she was further inconvenienced by an ignominious impulse to weep.

This gave Keith a distinct advantage: and he went on speaking with the same phenomenal vehemence. "I gave *you* credit for a better understanding of us both. Sheila and I, let me tell you, know our own minds very thoroughly, and have done so for years. You say Mark spoke of this yesterday? I'll warrant *he* never coupled Sheila's name with mine."

"No. He was speaking of himself. He feels . . . it isn't fair on her. . . ."

"A good deal fairer, in my opinion, than sending her home crumpled up as she was last night. Something happened, while we were out, that broke her all to pieces. Obviously, from the way you are both behaving, neither of you have a glimmering notion of what that girl feels for Mark. It's my belief that, through long repression, her love has reached a height of almost sacrificial devotion; and that's not the sort of thing a man can afford to fling aside for a scruple—even an honourable scruple."

"Would you say the same," she ventured—secretly overjoyed that he shared her opinion—"if you . . . were in Mark's position?"

Keith smiled. His anger had spent itself.

"Most likely I should be as cruelly considerate as he is being now. But standing outside, I can get a clearer view of things. Helen, if he persists in holding back, it's she that will suffer most: and I wouldn't mind telling him so in very plain English. But it would be infinitely better, for her own chances, if Sheila could be induced to speak for herself."

"Keith! By whom?"

"By me."

"Would you do it—really?"

"I would, if only to refute that woman's fairy tale. . . ."

"But—when?"

"To-day, if possible."

Helen's eyebrows were eloquent. It was not the first time, since war awakened him, that she had been taken aback by his quiet swiftness of thought and decision.

Before she had recovered from her surprise, he was speaking again. "So much for Mark and Sheila —good luck to them! As for yourself—" He paused, gazing at her steadfastly. "You . . . blessed woman, has the truth never once dawned on you . . . in all these years . . . ?"

It was visibly dawning on her now, half blinding her with its brightness. She had thought to lift a corner of the curtain, and here he was flinging back the whole of it that she might see and know the depth of her misunderstanding. Confronted thus by the real, hidden Keith, she found it amazingly difficult to say even a word in reply.

"Mark did write something once," she admitted lamely, "in his last letter from the trenches."

He could smile now at the tragic memory.

"That accounts for the missing sheet?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't believe him?"

"No. Somehow it seemed . . . preposterous."

"*Why* preposterous?"

His laconic bluntness told her how deeply he was moved.

"Keith, I'm eight years older than you. And . . . I felt as if it ought to be Sheila. And—" A still longer pause. Her heart was beating in jerks. "I wasn't altogether sure . . . of myself. Then when you came back, you gave no sign——"

"'He either fears his fate too much, or his deserts are small,'" Keith quoted, still watching her sunlit face. "A little of both—in this case. My dear . . . it's more than fifteen years now that I've loved you. I've never given a thought to any other woman. And I've never entertained a shred of hope——"

She tried to speak. It was useless: but the quiver of her lips emboldened him.

"Helen—*was* I wrong?"

"Partly wrong."

"Does that mean . . . would you—could you marry me?"

"I think it's rather . . . could *you*," she said very low; and if her words were faintly discouraging, he had the tender assurance of her eyes. "I must be frank with you, Keith. What I have to give—though I give it with all my heart—is not the same thing . . . quite. I can't be—you understand?"

"Of course I understand. . . ."

"But that's only half," she interposed, smiling. "And I *had* to say it. The other half is . . . I love you dearly. I need you . . . at every turn. We seem to belong in a very special way to each other. And this morning I wanted to murder Mrs. Melrose. If that's confession enough . . . ?"

"*If?*" he echoed: and she had never heard his expressive voice condense so much feeling into a single word.

She had risen in speaking, and now she stood before him in the clear sunlight, that made her eyes look bluer than ever, and discovered gleams of silver in her red-brown hair. But Keith had no concern for these, or for the lines pencilled by sorrow and strain. He looked beyond them to the springs of eternal youth within her. Frankly, and in a manner delightfully her own, she had confessed her need of him; yet he made no move towards her. They simply stood there, a foot of space between them, their spirits linked in closest communion—satisfied.

Even had they been indoors it is doubtful whether Keith would have done otherwise. The truth penetrated slowly; and for him that moment had a sacredness, an exaltation——

A touch, a word, would have brought them down to earth.

Yet it was he who first became aware of the "scarlet spider" skimming down the drive. "Sheila," he said quietly. "I'm certain of it."

And he was right. The telegram was addressed to Helen, and it ran: "Cannot come Wednesday. Please forgive.—SHEILA."

She handed it to Keith. He read it without comment and put out his hand for a form.

Helen stood close to him, almost touching his elbow, while he wrote: "Arrange to be free to-day. I am coming this morning. Urgent.—MACNAIR."

"Be off with that double quick," he said to the boy. Then, as the red wheels vanished, he turned to Helen. "Just a chance it may get there before me and pave the way. I've business first in Wynchmere that can't wait."

He spoke so completely in his ordinary manner that Helen felt almost as if their wonderful moment must have been a dream. But it was no dream. He was talking of it now in the same calm fashion.

"We won't tell Mark—yet," he said.

"No. It would be cruel. I may not even go up till you come back. He said he might work this morning and wanted to be alone. Afraid, I suspect, of my returning to the attack! Oh, Keith, I *hope* you succeed."

"I mean to. I hope she will. That's more to the point."

Helen sighed. "He simply adores her. One sees the difference—after Bel. But he's hopelessly obstinate about it. I was quite angry with him last night."

"Poor old chap!" His eyes dwelt upon her tenderly. "Sometimes I wonder which of your two children you love best."

"And I've sometimes wondered which of them *you* loved best!" was her counter-thrust to that impermissible remark. "Go soon. And . . . come back soon. Mrs. Melrose will never forgive me!"

"We'll survive that. And she'll have *me* to reckon with now. . . ."

Before leaving, he came to her in the drawing-room, where she was filling a bowl with daffodils. Silently he held out his hands, and she gave him both her own.

"Rather wet!" she said, to cover a troublesome feeling of confusion.

He smiled and drew her nearer. Then, very quietly, as if it were an act of consecration, he stooped and kissed her.

Afterwards she came out and waved to him from

the doorstep as he drove away: the same Keith to whom she had played elder sister for years; and yet so strange a Keith that it was as if she had barely known him till to-day.

Putting on her garden hat, she wandered out into the pinewood, dappled with sun and shadow, jewelled with patches of moss. Letters were waiting to be written. Let them wait. She had a consuming need to be alone with her amazing knowledge and her so strangely reawakened heart.

Fifteen years! What was she, to deserve such love from two such men as Richard and Keith? Deliberately she linked their names in her mind. Deliberately she stood still with uplifted face and closed eyes.

"Richard, *do* you understand?" she whispered just above her breath.

Only the pine branches rustled overhead.

CHAPTER VI

"You yourself know not how beautiful is your gift."
SIR RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

IT was Mrs. Melrose who opened Keith's telegram, and her elation may be conceived. Sheila was engaged, at the moment, on a new arrival; but directly she was free, her mother beckoned her mysteriously into the passage and handed her the envelope.

"I opened it, just to see if there was any answer," she explained with repressed eagerness, while Sheila stood frowning at the cryptic message that might mean . . . anything, everything.

"I *wish* you wouldn't open telegrams addressed to me, Mother," she said, none too graciously. It was the second time lately that Mrs. Melrose had been guilty of that dire offence; and she was one of the very few people who knew that Sheila could snap on provocation: a sufficiently illuminating comment on their relation.

"Well, really, dear, one doesn't *expect* a wire to be a love-letter in disguise!" Sheila, who could be dense at times, missed the delicate implication that Keith's message amounted to a proposal of marriage. "Of *course* you must be free. I'll arrange it with Sister Nelson."

"Oh, please don't trouble. *I* can arrange things all right."

And she did.

Some twenty minutes later, Mark's car drew up before the spacious, flat-fronted Georgian house; and Keith sprang out of it. To-day all his movements had a new alertness. He looked and felt five years younger.

Three shallow steps led up to the front door; and just as he reached these, Sheila came out in hat and coat, plainly prepared to join him. She looked paler than usual, but entirely mistress of herself.

"You got my wire?" he asked superfluously.

"Yes. Very mysterious! So I thought . . . better be prepared for emergencies. Nothing wrong with Mums?"

"No. Mums is particularly well this morning. It's not on *her* account I'm here."

The emphasised word brought a faint glow to her cheeks.

"Mark?" she asked, almost under her breath.

"Yes—Mark."

"You mean—he sent you?"

"No. The impulse was altogether my own. I am here because I believe in you, Sheila. Come for a stroll down the garden before we start back."

She came—bewildered, palpitating; prepared for almost anything but the actual event.

From the house of many windows, park-like grounds sloped gently down to the Wynch, broader and lazier here than at Wynchcombe Friars. The grass was bright with crocuses and early daffodils; and on the bare boughs overhead, half-opened leaf-buds gleamed like jewels in the sun.

Keith, as he turned, caught sight of Mrs. Melrose at an upper window, watching them go.

"Your mother has her eye on us," he remarked casually. "I believe she thinks I've come tearing over to make you an offer of marriage!"

"*You!*" Sheila confronted him in blank surprise.

"Don't be alarmed," Keith reassured her, with his whimsical smile. "I've already been guilty of it once this morning."

At that her eyes opened wider than ever, and he saw light dawn in their depths.

"Mums?"

He nodded.

"How simply splendid! It's been my pet, private dream for ages. But I was afraid. . . ."

"So was I. Horribly afraid. Without reason, I am thankful to say."

A pause.

"I want . . . to congratulate you," she said softly. "There's no one on earth like Mums. She's the youngest of us all. And . . . Mark? Isn't he glad?"

"Mark's in no mood to be glad about anything," Keith answered, with a straight look. "That's why I am here. We haven't told him. We can't tell him . . . yet. And we can't help him, either of us. Only you can do that."

She flushed hotly and looked down at the crocuses.

"I'm afraid you overestimate my powers. I've done all . . . I can."

"No, you've *not* done all," he corrected her gently. "Or I should not be standing here. I take it that you . . . care for Mark: that you have always cared."

She drew in her lips and answered nothing. Then she looked up at him, her secret unveiled. Strangely, it did not hurt her that he should know.

"I thought so," he remarked to her silence. "And on the strength of that conviction, I've come over to put the whole truth before you. It's no easy thing I'm going to ask of you, Sheila. But I believe in you—as I said."

He moved on in speaking, and she moved on beside him—wondering, fearing, yet longing to know all.

Plainly and straightforwardly he told of her mother's letter; quieting, with a tactful hand, her incidental burst of indignation. Personally, he assured her, he felt quite grateful to Mrs. Melrose, who, in trying to do him one good turn, had inadvertently done him another. That consideration calmed her a little and touched up her sense of humour.

"If she's been any help to you and Mums, I forgive her . . . for *that* part of it," she said in a voice that quivered between a laugh and a sob. "But I won't forgive her . . . about Mark . . . *ever*."

And when Sheila said that, she meant it. She had never forgiven Bel. It was the streak of Northern granite in her disposition. Keith had purposely included those remarks that had roused his own anger. He had reckoned them his strongest cards. He now perceived them to be stronger than he had supposed, and he suffered a passing twinge of conscience. But the matter at stake was too vital to be tripped up by side issues: and he went on to tell her, in quiet forcible phrases, of Helen's distress, of Mark's devotion that appeared to confirm rather than weaken

his flat refusal to sacrifice her on the altar of his own supreme need.

And Sheila heard him out in an unbroken silence. He could only gauge the effect of his revelation by her uneven breathing and an occasional movement of her lips.

When he had told all, he stood still and confronted her. "There, my dear," he said, a deep note of feeling in his voice. "It's a tragic tangle. And, for love of Mark and you . . . and Helen, I'd go almost any length to unravel it. But there's only one who can do that. And now perhaps you can guess what it is I came to say."

She still remained silent, studying a patch of crocuses, realising acutely all that his request implied; shrinking, yet passionately longing to go in and win that which was her own. She had gone very pale again. But as realisation deepened, her face became one burning blush.

"Do you mean . . . that I must offer . . . myself?" she asked at length, addressing her question to the crocuses. "I—I almost did it yesterday. At least . . . I'm sure he saw it in my eyes. And . . . he slipped away."

"Yes. He would. I am afraid—if you really want to convince him, you must put aside all the conventionalities, all your natural reluctance, and . . . show him your heart. *Make* him believe. He only hesitates, remember, from the highest motives and because he has no conception how deeply you care.—Now, will you come along with me and put everything right for the four of us?"

There fell another tremendous silence. Keith knew

well that he could scarcely have asked a harder thing of her. Second after second she stood there, her hands clenched, wrestling with her pride, her dumbness. . . .

Then she said slowly, as if speaking to herself: "I can't . . . I *can't*. It's against my whole nature. The words would never come. Oh *why* . . . won't he understand?"

"Because he is a very chivalrous gentleman," Keith answered with significant emphasis. "And if you really can't bring yourself to make a move, well . . . I must go back alone and confess I was mistaken. Of course, *I* can speak to him myself. But if I failed, I should fail fatally.—It is strange. I felt absolutely certain of you, Sheila.—Is that your final, considered answer? Am I to go?"

By a wise intuition he refrained from pleading or further argument, and his stern quietness stung her as no reproach would have done.

Suddenly she felt Mark himself tugging at her heart. She saw the look in his eyes, heard again those terrible words that haunted her brain. And was this to be the end? Were they all to be made miserable because there were bounds that her pride could not pass, a limit beyond which she could not or would not go?

Against that arbitrary decree all her deeper, truer nature rose up in revolt. There were no bounds . . . no limits. In that critical moment of decision her childhood's creed of courage came timely to her aid.

She looked up at last: and Keith saw that he had prevailed.

"No. You are *not* going back alone," she said, steadfastly meeting his gaze. "I was a coward to say . . . I couldn't speak to him. I can. And I will."

"Ah—that's more like it!" There was vast relief in Keith's tone. "You've saved my reputation for omniscience. Now, come and save Mark from himself."

"*If* I can," she murmured, with a catch in her breath; and they hurried back up the slope towards the house.

There on the steps they descried, afar off, the severely repressed figure of Mrs. Melrose radiating congratulations. Keith, the resourceful, felt suddenly nonplussed.

"Sheila, look there! We're done for."

"Not a bit of it," Sheila replied in her most matter-of-fact tone. "We're in a mortal hurry and we don't happen to notice her till we're in the car."

"Capital! Lucky I backed it well away from the entrance."

It was done—and neatly done. Keith was just turning the car when he ostentatiously caught sight of his would-be mother-in-law.

"Good morning, Mrs. Melrose," he called out cheerfully. "I'm sorry I can't stop. So good of you to spare her. She's badly wanted over there."

Mrs. Melrose, completely mystified and very much annoyed, fluttered a perfunctory hand and went back into the house wondering irritably what on earth had happened to Mr. Macnair.

That Lady Forsyth could have happened to him never so much as entered her head. There had been a good deal of talk at one time; but it had fizzled out for want of fuel. Her chief concern at the moment was to prevent Sheila from becoming entangled again with Mark. When he would have been a really

suitable match, she had muddled things. Just like her! But now—position or no position—it wouldn't do at all——

And Sheila, with never a word of her intent, was speeding through the April sunshine, bent upon a permanent entanglement with Mark: one that no mother in creation could undo.

As the little car lightly tossed the miles aside, her courage and purpose rose steadily.

Keith, for all his own eagerness, drove at a low speed. He knew well, from experience, how rushing through the air scatters and paralyses thought. They had but seven miles to cover; and he guessed rightly that Sheila needed a quiet breathing space to mobilise her spiritual forces for the brave adventure in hand. So they drove leisurely between woods and fields and uplands, quick with new life and young desires. And throughout that most companionable drive they scarcely exchanged a word.

Only when Keith handed Sheila out of the car, he retained her hand a moment in his own.

"Luck follows pluck," he said, smiling. "*I* have no fear. But first we must find Helen."

They found her basking on the terrace with an open book in her lap. As a matter of fact, she had not read two pages. She had done literally nothing but await their arrival.

"Well, here she is," Keith said, as Helen sprang up to greet them. "My private trophy. How's Mark?"

"I haven't been near him. I began to think you would never come."

"Ungrateful!" he reproached her gravely. "We've done it all in record time. We deserve congratulation. Now—give her your blessing and don't keep her long."

While the blessing was in progress he left them. His own turn would come in time.

"Dearest one," Sheila murmured between her kisses, "I *do* congratulate you with all my soul. He's a treasure. This morning. . . . But you shall hear all that . . . afterwards." Then she stood back a little, blushing and smiling. "Mums, tell me true. Am I being very unspeakable . . . after yesterday?"

"Very unspeakable!" The older woman slipped an arm round her and drew her through the open French window into the house. "God bless you, child," she added gravely, kissing her again. "You're being angelically a woman. But, darling . . . are you quite, *quite* sure . . . ?" Her eyes completed the question. "I've had pricks of conscience, waiting here. Have you realised . . . *every*thing?"

"Yes. Everything. Long ago," Sheila answered steadily, a hot wave of colour in her cheeks. "It simply doesn't count. Nothing counts . . . except him."

"In that case I'm satisfied. But I couldn't forget what you said once at Inveraig."

"Oh, that! Fancy your remembering. But now—it's Mark. He's my share of the War. And . . . gospel truth, Mums—I'd sooner 'mother' him than anything else on earth."

"Oh—if you can only make him understand *that!*" Tears stood in Helen's eyes. "It was not for nothing I christened you 'Queen of the Poor Things.'"

"Mums, how *dare* you!" For a moment Sheila was really angry. "He's *not* a poor thing. He's the most glorious thing that was ever made.—Now, let me fly upstairs. 'Valour will come and go!'"

Her low laugh had a break in it, and she hurried from the room.

Outside the studio, she paused to steady herself. No sound came from within; and she opened the door an inch or two.

"Mark," she called softly. "It's Sheila. Can I come in?"

"*Sheila!*" Amazement and smothered passion sounded in his voice. But there was fear in it also.

"Come in, of course," he added hastily, as if to cover both.

She found him by the open window, sitting at his easel, crayon in hand: and on the easel stood a delicate pastel study of herself. If courage had wavered a moment, it revived at that. She looked from him to the picture with lifted brows.

"Quite good," she said, slipping past the awkward explanation of her presence.

"It isn't. It's a wretched travesty!" he answered bluntly. "But one must do something . . . to keep going." He paused and scanned her face searchingly. She did not attempt to avoid his gaze. Her eyes were radiant, as if the windows of her soul were flung open to the sunrise.

Sudden fear came upon him and sudden remembrance of his mother's words. He had not fortified himself to resist this. Yet resist it he must.

"*Why* have you come again so soon . . . like this?" he asked, going straight to the point in his usual fashion.

"Because . . . after yesterday . . ." She hesitated and drew in her lips. "There could be only one way to put things straight between us and make you unsay that bitter thing about the dead having the best of it. Mark, it haunted me. But . . . I couldn't have brought myself to come, like this, so soon, except for Mr. Macnair and Mother's extraordinary letter to Mums."

"What letter? Has Mums anything to do with this?" Mark flashed out.

And Sheila was thankful she could answer truthfully: "No. It was all Mr. Macnair. He came over because of that letter—I'll tell you afterwards—and I found he knew . . . about my caring. He was splendid. He made me see . . . there was only this one way. He said—'Come!' And he encouraged me. . . ."

"Keith encouraged you? It was no business of his." Mark had found his voice at last. He had forgotten the mysterious letter. There was only room in him for one hope, one fear. "Sheila . . . *what* does it all mean? Are you——?"

"Yes, Mark"—her voice took its deepest, tenderest tone—"I am . . . asking you to marry me, because I know, now, that you will never do it yourself. And I know, now, that you *do* . . . care. . . ."

"'*Care?*' . . . I simply worship you. And, for that very reason, I will not take advantage of your heavenly impulse of devotion; though God knows I honour you for it. Broken things appeal so strongly to your heart. You have to make allowance for that."

"I have to make allowance for nothing."

Her tone was repressed now and her eyes veiled.

Was she to repeat yesterday's ordeal, with aggravations?

"You don't understand," he forced himself to say. "You can't understand all it would mean. Sheila . . . a man in my case has no right to offer, or to accept, marriage: and I . . . I refuse to snatch happiness at your expense. Keith ought to have known me better by now. . . . You, of all people, tied to a cripple . . . a sort of glorified hospital nurse! If I shrank from sacrificing a worthless woman like Miss Alison, *is* it likely I would sacrifice *you* . . . ?"

But Sheila had endured enough.

"Oh, Mark, can't you see? Are you determined not to see?" she cried, her low voice tremulous with passion, her twilight blue eyes full of pain. "For her, it would have been a sacrifice. For me . . . I—I can't find the word that's big enough. It's not that I don't understand—and admire your reluctance. But you have to understand too. Mark . . . must I say all? Must I tell you that from the very beginning, since I was sixteen, there's been no one . . . but you. There will never be. You are all I want on earth. You say . . . you have no right. But remember, there's every hope. . . . Dr. Norton says so. And even if there was . . . no hope, if you were three times as helpless as you are, I would still rather be *your* hospital nurse than any other man's . . . wife."

At that, with an abrupt movement, he turned away and hid his face in his hands.

"Oh, leave me . . . leave me," he murmured desperately. "How *can* I see clear, think clear, when you stand there . . . tempting me——"

His voice broke. Silence fell—and lasted.

Sheila continued to stand there. Her hands were cold, her limbs shaking. If she left him now, his strong will would reassert itself. She could not go through this again. And there an end.

Pride argued: "In the face of flat refusal, you can go no further." But she saw Mark's shoulders heave . . . once; and there could be no more argument; no more pride——

Without a word she went close up to him, slipped a hand round his head and drew it against her breast.

In that fashion she gave him her answer. Yet he made no sign, till two tears fell upon his hands that hid him from her. Then he uncovered his face and looked up into hers, as an earth-bound soul may look into heaven.

"Beloved," he whispered, "it's a desperate risk. You've no right . . . I've no right. . . ." But his arms were round her; and his head, that still leaned against her, felt the glad leap of her heart.

"*We* have the right, if we choose," she whispered, and stooped her face to his. . . .

At last he drew her down on to his knee and set her a little away to reassure himself that the impossible had actually come to pass.

And she sat there smiling at him: too purely exultant to do anything but smile.

"You little thing—you little lovely thing!" he said in a low voice of rapture. "You're the first person that's ever cut right across my will and bowled me over. I swore to poor Mums last night that nothing would induce me——"

"And you were conquered by a little thing!"

Very tenderly she laid her cheek against his. "Most wholesome for you—and a triumph for me!" She paused, dwelling on him . . . realising in her turn. "Mark, I wish I wasn't quite so small, then I could help you more, my own self. Lifting you—and that."

"Lifting me!" His eyes were misty with tenderness. "You've lifted me clean out of the nethermost hell. Isn't that enough in the way of assistance?"

"Yes—if I could believe——!"

"Well, you may believe. I'm not given to high-flown talk. You've saved me from being a curse to myself and every one belonging to me. That's the way Sheila-people are made!"

Then his face grew grave and the arm that was round her tightened its hold. "Mouse, it's difficult to speak of . . . the hidden things. But I do want you to know what it means to me that you should have come, like this, refusing to let convention or my own limitations stand in the way of our great reality. It's readjusted the whole perspective of things, that was in great danger of getting out of gear altogether."

"Yes, I saw that," she answered, her eyes filling.

"Of course you did, angel of wisdom. And you've made me see—no end of things. There'll be some talk, no doubt, among the kind of people who must talk—or perish. But, when all's said, if you and I choose not to regard this irksome disability, no one else has any call to make a howl about it. After all it's nothing—less than nothing—in to-day's vast sum of tragedy. And there remains the great outstanding fact that it has saved me, so as by fire, from a woman whose love would have wrecked my life.

Also—it has given me *you*, which is a long sight more than I deserve."

"No—*no*," she protested low and passionately.

"I say 'Yes!' And I mean it. But—there's one thing I wanted to tell you yesterday and couldn't, for fear of telling . . . all the rest."

"You were very cruel yesterday." A quiver crossed her face, and he held her closer still.

"My darling, how could I dream you cared—like that! It knocked me to pieces. And now—I can only thank God all my days for Keith's insight and your courage. But . . . what I'm trying to tell you is this. The deepest and best in me, that was yours in the beginning, *has been* yours all along—buried under rubbish, but alive and untarnished by any contact with *her*. That's what I meant when I said she never touched the depths. Mouse—are you glad to know that?"

She only sat there gazing at him, mute homage in her eyes. "It's too much. I can't say it," she murmured at last. "And now—there's poor Mr. Seldon torn in two. Perhaps . . . it's the same with him——"

"Seldon! Was it *her* you were talking of? Poor devil! Is she going to marry him?"

"I don't even know if he's asked her. They seem to have talked round it all. She says . . . you raised her standard. He implies . . . I've done the same for him. That seems to make complications. So there they are——"

"And here *we* are—God be praised!" Mark broke in, a note of triumph in his deep voice. "And we're going to achieve something between us, you and I,

now you've made a live man of me again. There's a deal of work I can still do with a Sheila-wife to help me. How about dedicating the arts and crafts colony entirely to our own fellows disabled in this war. And those who are fit for it shall be put on to the land. My own disablement won't hamper me there. It's a mustard-seed of a notion. It may grow into a tree. There's a programme for you. All your doing! You've been my real source of inspiration from the first. And you always will be.—Don't cry about it, Beloved. It's too splendid for anything."

"Yes—that's why," she answered lucidly—and could no more. The great wave of joy that swelled up within her broke softly in a shower of tears. It was the pent-up emotion of months. And Mark drew her head against his shoulder, comforted and caressed her; kissed away her tears and held her to him without a word till she had regained her lost control.

Then: "You're not going back to-night; don't you think it!" he said in her ear.

"I don't think it," she answered, with a small shiver of happiness. "Mother would bite me to pieces."

"Well, that settles it. You're under my orders now: and you take your leave from to-day. You must write a note to explain. Macgregor can handle the little car. She almost drives herself, and he can bring any scrap of luggage you're wanting."

"Listen to the autocrat!" She sat upright now, beaming on him. "And I've got to write a note of explanation. And *you* don't realise yet what that means."

"Why? Where's the mystery? That letter?"

"Yes. Interfering people are quite useful sometimes—by accident!"

"Well—let's hear. What's she been up to now?"

Thus invited, Sheila gave him a revised version of the letter that had achieved precisely what it set out to prevent. She omitted the most egregious remarks and skimmed lightly over the talk about herself and him; but before she had finished her recital, Mark's quick brain perceived whither it led.

"Of course, Mums took it straight to Keith," he broke in, exultantly, "and of course the good fellow had to blurt out the truth in self-defence. Well played, Mrs. Melrose! But why the dickens didn't they come straight up and tell me. Here I've been left in the dark for hours: and I'm supposed to be master of this house!"

"Well, you see," Sheila explained, dimpling, "Mr. Macnair was too busy rushing off to fetch me. And Mums couldn't bear to tell you when you were so unhappy."

Mark's eyes softened at that. "Just like her. How the woman spoils me! And I'm afraid you'll be as bad."

"I'm not so sure. I can be sterner than Mums. Mr. Macnair could tell you that. . . ."

"Could he? I'll ask him. And he carried you off, like an elderly Lochinvar, under your mother's very eyes! Splendid chap, Keith!"

"Yes. But he ought to know you better by now," she reminded him gravely. "And he had no business to encourage me! But with Mother flinging me at his head, you can't blame the poor man if he was in a

hurry to account for me by foisting me on to you.—And I'm going to tell Mother the whole truth," she concluded, colouring a little at thought of the ordeal. "That I knew you wanted me and wouldn't ask, so I came over and proposed to you . . . and I'm not ashamed of the fact!—Oh, look, there they are on the terrace, too pleased with each other to bother about us."

For a few minutes Mark sat watching them with a very full heart. Keith was talking in his grave quiet fashion, and Helen walked close beside him, listening —absorbed.

"Seems a shame to interrupt them," Mark said softly. "But I want her. She's had worry enough on my account, bless her! And this is going to atone for it all."

Then at the top of his voice, he called out: "Hullo, Mother! Mums! Come along and report yourself at headquarters."

She stopped, turned, and stood a moment smiling up at him. His voice, his face told her all she needed to know.

"Come on—quick!" he repeated; and she came, as always, obedient to his summons.

THE END

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